

The first few cases reported to us we considered as exceptional ones, as margin-of-error cases which are bound to result from a system as large and decentralized as Revenue Canada Taxation, as anomalies which we might be able to address satisfactorily in discussions with Revenue Canada Taxation. These, however, were followed by more, and yet more, and we found ourselves faced not with a few isolated incidents which might easily be resolved, but with a seemingly wholesale and systematic assault on individual artists. No change had been made to the law, yet, by interpreting existing legislation in a new light and with alarming zeal, Revenue Canada Taxation was beginning to shake the very foundations of our culture.

Officials of Revenue Canada Taxation were at pains to explain this onslaught as a mistake. Revenue Canada Taxation is after bigger catches than what little the arts community has to offer, we were told. We were also told that it costs Revenue Canada Taxation more to capture revenues from the arts community than the comparatively small amounts gained in the process -- small to Revenue Canada Taxation, but staggering to the individual artists who were being reassessed in job lots. We were assured that these actions were not a deliberate attempt to roll up the entire arts community. We were told that the artists being reassessed had been complying in good faith in the same manner that they had been doing for a decade; that those cases under review were clearly recognized professionals, and not hobbyists, by all other definitions than those employed by Revenue Canada Taxation; that the fault lay with the manner in which the computer had been programmed; that something had gone wrong.

In response, the Canadian Conference of the Arts suggested that, if it were simply a misunderstanding, an error, an inappropriately programmed computer, then it could and should be corrected forthwith. Things, however, are never that simple: once set in motion, these processes cannot be easily halted, it would seem; indeed, whatever their cause and justification, they grind relentlessly on, sweeping before them the individuals they were purportedly never intended to affect. There comes a time, however, when mistakes left uncorrected become deliberate actions, in effect if not in intent, and no amount of explanation can excuse the resultant damage. Revenue Canada Taxation continued on its devastating course, impervious to criticism and deaf to increasing demands for a halt to the process, until its own momentum finally brought it into contact with the high-profile cases which focussed public attention on its actions in respect of the arts community. The attention paid to this matter by the media and in the House of Commons eventually led to the reference of the matter to this Standing Committee.