

The Halifax Conference

B Y K E N B U R K E

Clap clap clap.
The final session of The Halifax Conference: A National Forum on Canadian Cultural Policy was a time for applause. As each of the conference's appointed speakers moved behind the lectern and said their piece, the audience of artists, cultural bureaucrats, and combinations of the two warmly responded.

They clapped as Sociologist Thelma McCormack criticized them for their "condescending attitude towards the public" and during the conference dissected the new conservatism in government. They gave a similar ovation of playwright Rick Salutin as he read out the Conference Declaration, a dramatic statement reaffirming the principle of public funding of the arts free from government interference or politically-motivated aid. And they gave a hearty round of applause to then-federal minister of culture Marcel Masse after he launched a "blistering" attack on the Conference Declaration (wrote the *Globe & Mail*) and defended his right to set whatever policies and make whatever grants he wanted.

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If decorum won over politicians and influenced Tories, the battle for adequate arts funding would be over already. But instead, it's just beginning, again.

Organized from Sept. 21-22, to both coincide with and precede a meeting of provincial culture ministers and their federal counterparts, the Halifax Conference had an agenda heavy with issues vital to the future of the Arts in Canada. Besides dealing with last year's Tory budget cuts and possible cuts to come, the Conference's 300 delegates split up into a series of "Task Force workshops" to create a cultural policy worthy enough to face the future. From Federal/provincial jurisdictions to the merits of private sector funding, it was the delegate's task to sort out the options and start charting the best path through the ice fields that lie ahead. All in one short day.

The reasons why the three hundred delegates gathered at Mount St. Vincent university campus that sunny September weekend had as much to do with the ghosts of past history as the threats of the present. The history of cultural activism in Canada is full of momentous conferences and dramatic commissions (see Sidebar) as well as hard work in invisible chores. After the huge public meeting in Halifax last Jan. 27, when over a thousand artists and non-artists crowded into the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium to protest Tory funding cutbacks, arts coalitions across the country have been looking to tap that energy again. Perhaps they long for yet another legendary generate conference where the analysis fuses into a perfect blend of passion, reason, and foresight. You can't blame them for trying.

If ever there was a time for Canadian artists to organize, it would have to be now. "Artists as a class are the poorest people in the country except for old age pensioners and native people living on reservations," says historian George Woodcock, noting that the majority of artists in Canada live below the poverty line, which was \$8,970 a year in 1982. The entire arts funding system is also under attack through budget cutbacks and a philosophical shift to the right that threatens to take back many of the advances won by previous generations of artists.

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"Canada is a forgetting country," says Rick Salutin. "We forget these achievements at our peril."

The warnings of danger ahead for arts funding began immediately after the Progressive Conservatives' federal election victory last September. The Tories had promised to make heavy cuts into the budget for their announced "first priority" of deficit reduction, and arts had always been low on the priority list at budget time. Although the slashes revealed in Michael Wilson's November "pre-budget" weren't as deep as some feared, they were twice as rough on arts funding compared to other sections of the budget — a six percent reduction compared the average drop of three percent. The CBC was especially hard-hit, losing \$85 million, or 9.5 percent of their yearly budget.

Besides the cuts, it's clear some significant changes are being considered in the way culture is handled by the feds. Two task forces are loose in the country right now — one "on Funding of the Arts in Canada" and the other "to review the Canadian Broadcasting System."

A "Study Team on Culture and Communication" also recently filed its report on all government Arts and Culture funding on August 30, although study team chair Sidney Handlemen says the report may never be made public.

Like the hushed-up task force which recommended the dismantling of the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, this "study team" was also set up by ultra-conservative Tory Defense minister Erik Nielsen, so supporters of arts funding are justifiably nervous at the report's possible impact.

"Its recommendations will remain a

secret until we begin to feel their sting," says visual artist Stephen Phelps. "Its mandate was particularly insidious, I'm told."

Conservatism and culture was more than grumbled about at the Halifax conference — it was actively studied. York University Sociology professor McCormack presented a paper before the conference entitled "Arts and the New Conservatism", which investigates the phenomenon causing so many artists so much grief...and seemingly gaining momentum as it moves along.



McCormack identifies three different types of conservative existing within the new conservatism, and notes the specific problems they can cause for progressive arts funding policy.

Type A is the one who's been getting most of the press because of their flashy ideas — the rigidly traditional free-enterprise conservative. They're against government involvement in the private sector completely — and they most assuredly consider art as belonging to the realm of free enterprise. These conservatives look south to Ronald Reagan for their inspirational cultural policy.

"I recently heard the head of the National Endowment of the Arts in the United States discuss President Reagan's policy for the arts," she says. "It is," he said, "very simple: reduce inflation."

The idea follows that a reduced inflation rate would lead more people to use their profits for corporate donations to the arts. Type A may be far more prevalent in America than Canada, but it certainly differs from McCormack's two other new conservative examples in its purity of stated principle. Type B distinctly differs from a Type A conservative in their approach to the arts. Funding the arts is not a horror to them, says McCormack; even increasing funding to the arts may be necessary for their desired effect. "However," she says, "what this type of conservative wants for the money is not more art, but different art, an art that imitates life as the conservatives see it, an art that reflects the values of Canadian conservatism just as many of the great masterpieces of the Renaissance celebrated the Church. No more social photograph

that keeps reminding us of the Great Depression; no more poetry about alienation; no more plays about dispossessed refugees," says McCormack.

What the Type B conservative is looking for is art forms, content, and critics to fit their worldview. Finding that ideal — the new Ayn Rand — may take time and money, but as McCormack phrases it for them, "creating a mystique of conservatism will cost something, but what a good investment!"

Type C is far less ideologically minded than either of McCormack's other archetypes. The issue is fairly simple for this creature of public service — what they want is control. They're usually government bureaucrats who want more control of the policies in their defined area. A "hands-on approach" is their motto, and it leads to possible censorship — as in the recent case where the BBC in Britain was pressured not to run a documentary on Northern Ireland. It also cuts the ground from under the "arms-length approach" where arts funding is administered regardless of public affiliations and/or personal beliefs.

The common denominator in all these groups is their intolerance to arts funding without strings attached. Along with this approach follows the idea that not all art should be supported — at least not the art which doesn't appeal to them.

"When you scratch a conservative, sooner or later you will always find a social Darwinist who thinks he or she is protecting the standards of survival of the fittest, painful as that process may be," says McCormack.



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Survival of the fittest was a theme which ran through much of the Conference, though maybe unwittingly. Much of the thanks for this unwritten agenda should go to a certain Jim Wilson. With immaculately groomed silver hair, a series of tastefully coloured blazers, and a matter-of-fact demeanor, he was the private sector's low-key prophet of gloom and doom at the conference. Wilson is both vice-president of Harris Steel and a past president of the Burlington Cultural Centre. The message he had for the artists in attendance was simple — get lean, mean, and competitive or get dead.

"I find it difficult to sympathise with those arts and culture groups in debt and on the brink of destruction," he said in a reasonable tone. "They have neglected the strenuous pursuit of money." Much of the conference time of delegate participation soon became bogged down in passionate refutations of Wilson's arguments. The Market — be it free market or mixed market, but most assuredly a market where art is a thing to be bought and sold — was the buzzword of the conference, just as it is on Parliament Hill. People like Stephen Pederson, a freelance musician and journalist, answered, "When you talk about balancing budgets, arts organizations are terrific. They're a lot better than Dome Petroleum or the Canadian Commercial Bank with Canadians' money — and with less chance of a bail-out when they get in trouble." But in any case, however passionate the attack on conservative ideas, the language of the conference was the language of exchange.

Instead of using the conference to question fundamental ideas holding up our arts system — such as the concept of making art into a commodity to sell like any other — these questions were brushed over for urgent appeals to think up a better tax break system to encourage corporate donations. While the workshop on "implications of Market Models" eventually concluded there was no reason to expect the private sector would fill in the role of enlightened sponsor if government funding dried up. Debate generally concentrated on how to make "commercial" arts viable with the help of

As disconcerting as it was, the spectacle of arts delegates dutifully applauding a federal minister who had just rejected the aims of their conference was just one of the many ironies of the Halifax conference. Instead of beginning a genuine debate on some of the point of difference at the Conference, there was little discussion time set aside and an entire evening of the day-and-a-half event was left open for reception and party. Instead of attempting to gain support for the arts by attempting to change the elitist system so that more Canadians can afford to enjoy the arts, the means of public lobbying chosen by the Conference was "that every arts group in Canada spend one percent of its budget on a co-ordinated campaign to build public support for arm's length (funding) and the arts via petition, letters, and education of the public." In other words, instead of trying a community outreach approach, they opted for a P.R. campaign to sell arts to the ignorant public. If Marcel Masse hadn't resigned, it would still be making him smile today. With that kind of an opposition to arts cutbacks and government control, he'd be able to do just about anything he wanted.

There wasn't time available in the two-and-a-half hour task force meet-

ings to discuss points that were sticky, or controversial to the majority, the points raised were problems delegates saw in the system as it worked for them: i.e. grants weren't suiting them, they aren't eligible for grants, the tax system makes it impossible for the m to make a living, and so on. These points are all necessary to discuss in order to find solutions for the artists, but what many delegates failed to see was where the world didn't end — at the edge of the arts community.

With very few exceptions, the missing element in the Halifax Conference was delegates concerned with their audiences' welfare. Artists' rights may have been talked about extensively, but many of the rights these artists and organizations were arguing for was the maintenance of the status quo: the right to sell the product to the going rate even if the tickets have to be set at 20.

Lost in all this understandable concern over the nuts and bolts of pulling in a living wage was where the community fits in.

"We have to re-examine what we mean by the public," said Thelma McCormack at the final assembly. "We have not done much talking about arts vis-a-vis the public. It we persist in a hierarchical, uneven relationship, we'll have more uneven relations," she said.

In his speech at the beginning of the conference, playwright Rick Salutin (*1837, Les Canadiens*) spoke about bridging the gaps between the artist and audience as well. "We need allies," he urged, "so when we go to the politicians, they cannot categorize us as just another interest group for their piece of the pie. And we've overlooked our most obvious allies — our audiences."

As playwright Rick Salutin said at the opening of the Halifax Conference, "We make our contributions on the shoulders of those who came before us. Earlier generations of Canadian artists did not have the table set for them — they had to make the table. Whatever the problems, a certain foothold has been achieved."

The political struggle to gain that foothold began before the great Depression of the 1930's. Canadian art which reflects back something of the country and people was still a relatively new thing. The post-World War I economic boom had resulted in wealthy citizens offering their patronage to scattered artists such as Tom Thompson and the Group of Seven, which in turn led to their development of something approaching a "Canadian style." While many of the artists' economic gains were washed away in the Depression, the idea of Canadians developing a vital, indigenous culture was no longer an alien one. By 1927, a Royal Commission on Radio Broadcasting was able to clearly state, "Canadian listeners was Canadian Broadcasting." With the tentative emergence of Canadian arts also came the realization of what foreign cultural

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"Governments should support the cultural development of a nation, not attempt to control it." — Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent, from a speech announcing the formation of the Canada Council.

The history of Canadian cultural policy before Mulroney is more than just "a reflection of the erratic growth patterns of any young, developing nation," as a document prepared for the Halifax Conference states. It is the basis for understanding many of the proposals and counter-proposals flying about in this latest round of the culture wars.

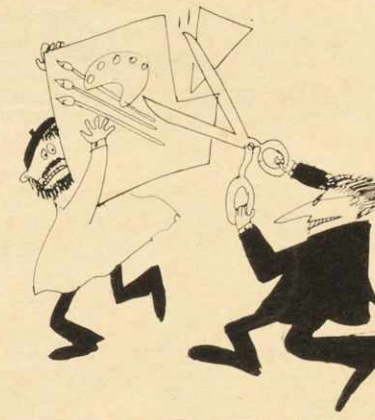
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domination meant. For example, when the CBC came into being in 1936 it was partially the result of years of lobbying by a grassroots organization called The Radio League, whose motto was "The State or the States."

In 1941, over 150 artists from across Canada met at Queen's University at a "Conference of Canadian Artists" now known as *The Kingston Conference*. Besides forming the Federation of Canadian Artists (FCA), conference delegates called for a more

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central place for the artist in Canadian life. A conference demand for a War Art program was soon backed up by a petition signed by over one thousand FCA members, and the program was initiated.

By 1944, the FCA and other arts organizations held a "March on Ottawa" and presented *The Artists' Brief* to the House Committee on Reconstruction and Re-establishment. Among their recommendations were the establishment of a government body to promote the arts, community cultural centres, and copyright protection for artists. The FCA and other

organizations merged to become the Canadian Arts Council (CAC) in 1945, and continued to pressure the government for the formation of a National Arts Board.

In 1949, the Federal government appointed a Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters, and Sciences, which became known as the Massey Commission. In the same year, the Saskatchewan Arts Board was founded as the first "arms-length" non-political arts agency in Canada.

"Trudeau's view was basically that the control of a nation's cultural life, and especially of its arts, is essential for the consolidation of political power, and cultural policies should be directed towards supporting a government's principal aims," wrote George Woodcock in his book, *Strange Bedfellows: the State and the Arts in Canada*.

Soon special government grants for festivals, events, and tours promoting national unity and bilingualism began increasing at the same time the Canada Council's budget remained frozen, losing money every year to inflation. Gertrude Laing, Chair of the Standing Committee on Broadcasting, Film, and Assistance to the Arts in 1978, said, "The willingness to fund 'National Unity' through the arts, but not adequately to fund the arts themselves, is evidence of an attitude to cultural policy that gives me great concern."

In 1980, a Federal Policy Review Committee was formed by the federal Liberals to update the Massey Report. Better known as the Applebaum-Hebert Committee (after its co-chairs), it received 1300 briefs and filed its report in November, 1983 to a decidedly mixed reaction. So far, very few of its recommendations have been implemented, especially the more controversial ones, which include the elimination of all CBC television production and drastically altering the role of the National Film Board.