

[Translation]

CANADA COUNCIL

CLOSURE OF ART BANK—INQUIRY—DEBATE CONTINUED

On the order:

Resuming the debate on the inquiry of the Honourable Senator Corbin, calling the attention of the Senate to the virtually unanimous opposition of artistic and cultural groups to the announced closing of the Canada Council's Art Bank. — (*Honourable Senator Roux*).

Hon. Pierre De Bané: Honourable senators, as our esteemed colleague Senator Roux is not with us this afternoon, I would like to say a few words on this matter. Here are a few comments that I respectfully submit to your attention following Senator Corbin's remarks on the Canada Council's decision to shut down its art bank.

I do not wish to comment on the validity of the Canada Council's decision, nor do I want to talk about the merits of the Art Bank, the benefits that Canadian visual artists can derive from it, or its role to make art lovers mainly, but also Canadians in general, more aware of Canadian art.

I would like to open up the debate a bit by talking briefly about two aspects of the issue. First, I would like to talk about the difficult situation now faced by the senior management of our great national cultural institutions because of the budget cuts made following the tabling of Minister Martin's Estimates for the 1995-96 fiscal year. Also I would like to say a few words about the role and responsibility of governments — especially the federal government — in arts and culture. I will be dealing mainly with the Canada Council, although all our great cultural institutions are currently in the same difficult situation. I might add that the Canada Council is probably better off than the others.

It must be pointed out that the current situation is not a recent phenomenon; it goes back a long way.

Since 1987-88, parliamentary appropriations for the Canada Council have gone down 22.8 per cent in real terms — what is commonly referred to as constant dollars — once inflation is factored in.

The latest cuts, of course, go back to the beginning of this year. This is a brutal fact cultural agency heads and boards of directors or governors must face. If I may, I would say that they have to face the music and make decisions that "hurt." At the Canada Council, these include closure of the Art Bank. At the CBC, they are leading to the laying off of thousands of employees and the closure of the library in Montreal, an essential

resource for creative artists. At the National Arts Centre, they have resulted in the elimination of the positions of the directors of dance and of both English and French theatre, and hence the cancellation of three seasons of dance and theatre to make way for multidisciplinary festivals and commercial productions. At Telefilm Canada, these decisions include the end of assistance to regional film festivals, such as the Témiscamingue film festival, in favour of the major festivals, such as those in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver. At the NFB, this means that regional film libraries will be closed and their collections turned over to public libraries. I have been told that so far it has been possible to protect production and creative artists, but this will probably not last in the years to come.

The nature of the decisions made is open to challenge, but not the need to make them. This is the result of the alarming financial situation Canada and the provinces are in. It is the unfortunate side effect of the reduction in parliamentary appropriations for these major cultural agencies. Such cuts can elicit two responses. The first is the following: Performers and creative artists in the cultural sector are just like everybody else and, like all Canadians, must also feel the effects of the crisis.

Social programs have been hit; hospitals are closing; tens of thousands of jobs are being cut in the public service and in the private sector. There can, however, be another response.

Last week, at the monthly dinner of the friends of *Cité libre* — which I attended with Senator Gigantès, who is here — I listened to the speech made by Judith Maxwell, who is the president of the Canadian research network on public policy, a renowned analyst of socio-economic issues, as well as the former chairperson of the Economic Council of Canada.

Her presentation was entitled "Fiscal Deficit — Social Deficit." This title reminds me of Senator Gigantès' report on the same issue. Mrs. Maxwell argued, among other things, that the fiscal deficit generates a social deficit and that it is dangerous to deal with the former while ignoring the latter since it could make things worse.

Mrs. Maxwell mentioned the following problems as symptoms of our social deficit: the school drop-out phenomenon, the unemployment rate — the issue reviewed by Senator Gigantès — growing economic uncertainty, personal distress and the collapse of the family unit. In my opinion, she forgot one of the most important symptoms, namely the deterioration of the quality and the status of arts and culture.

I have previously stressed the importance of artistic and cultural environment to our society. Senator Roux, who probably speaks with more authority than most of us on the subject, has said that culture and the arts are the oxygen, lungs, and heart, the vital organs of any society. Senator Roux made it clear that culture is what gives the country its soul.