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How to turn the CBC into a public broadcaster

Like most people, I don't hate the CBC. I just don't watch it. And I resent paying for it.

It costs each taxpayer across the country \$50 a year to keep Peter Mansbridge delivering his patronizing, left-liberal bromides each night, whether we want them or not.

According to a story in the National Post this week, the CBC has discovered through an internal study that a great many of us (it didn't disclose how many) find the public network stuffy, arrogant and biased.

CBC editor-in-chief Tony Burman rejoined that the public think all media are biased, not just the CBC.

The big difference, however, is that nobody is forced to pay for the bias of Global and CTV, just the CBC's.

Unfortunately, at this point the debate always slides into a stalemate between those who would give the network more money, so it can be more sanctimonious and CBCish than ever, and those who want it sold off.

We should find a more constructive solution.

The question is whether there are legitimate national television needs apart from the consumer market served by private broadcasters.

I would say that in a country as fragmented as ours there plainly are. The hard part is figuring out how to fill them. The CBC certainly doesn't. It is merely the private communications network of our tax-funded governing class, of which the CBC itself is a charter member. As such it is not a "public" broadcaster at all.

If private broadcasters answer to the advertisers, to whom does the CBC account? Not to the state. It is (quite properly) protected from political interference. And not to the public, for we are forced to pay for it even though most of us refuse to watch it. The answer is, to nobody. It is a sealed corporate culture, self-selecting, self-perpetuating and self-serving.

As a result it is snotty, preachy, predictable, unsympathetic and dull.

If the CBC is ever to become a "public" broadcaster it must become accountable in some way to the public.

Suppose, for a moment, that the national government shifted the CBC to a funding formula which was one-third public donations and only two-thirds tax-funding. A notice appears on tax forms explaining that for every dollar it gets in tax-deductible donations, the CBC gets two more from the government. And that's all it gets.

A formula of this sort, phased in over five or six years, would force the CBC to canvas high and low for public interest subjects and audiences--on the left, on the right, in the biggest cities and in the remotest regions.

For every David Suzuki yammering about "climate change" we'd get at least one Tim Ball refuting it. For every Naomi Klein calling us to the WTO barricades we'd get a Michael Walker calling us to our senses. It would be as right-wing as it is left-wing, as regional as it is urban, as pragmatic as it is artsy.

For this I'd willingly toss in about \$100 a year, instead of \$50 unwillingly. Add the matching government grant and it's \$300.

If by appealing to individuals, churches, business and professional groups and nonprofit organizations, across the spectrum and across the country, they can build a strong national audience, well and good.

And if they can't, why are they there?

- Link Byfield

Link Byfield is chairman of the Edmonton-based Citizens Centre for Freedom and Democracy.

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