

Unity Through Ambiguity

SEAN GRAHAM

Abstract:

Throughout Canadian broadcasting's formative years, 1927-1936, tensions over local content and bilingual programming threatened the existence of any potential national broadcasting system. Conscious of these tensions, supporters of public radio were intentionally ambiguous on questions of language and regional representation in order to maintain widespread popular support. This policy of ambiguity would later prove prophetic as the Canadian Radio League (CRL) secured wider national support than the Canadian Association of Broadcasters (CAB), and inflamed passions over bilingual programming threatened the legitimacy of the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission (CRBC). By the time the CBC was established in 1936, it was clear that for any national radio system to be successful it would have to be able to produce national and local content in both official languages. The process of creating a national radio network showed that in order to have a popular position on language and regional representation, it was best to have position at all.

National unity has long been a struggle for Canadian politicians and cultural leaders. In fact, in the late nineteenth century, it was one of the critical elements of Sir John A. Macdonald's National Policy. His efforts centred on overcoming the deep geographical and cultural divisions that separate Canada's regions and language groups.

Macdonald was the first in a long line of Canadian Prime Ministers who tried to bring the nation together and overcome these differences. Concerns over unity, however, actually predated Confederation as Lord Durham, Governor General of British North America, dealt with similar issues in his 1839 report that recommended uniting Upper and Lower Canada. Generally, questions over national unity in Canada have been focused on one concern: ensuring equitable regional and linguistic representation. As a result, issues related to linguistic and regional representation frequently enter into important debates over policy and procedure within the federal government. It is no surprise, therefore, that the development of radio was no exception. Language and regional tensions played a prominent role in developing the national radio system during its formative years, 1927 to 1936. Conscious of these tensions, supporters of public radio were intentionally ambiguous on questions of language and regional representation in order to maintain widespread popular support. This policy of ambiguity would later prove prophetic as the Canadian Radio League (CRL) secured wider national support than the Canadian Association of Broadcasters (CAB) and inflamed passions over bilingual programming threatened the legitimacy of the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission (CRBC). By the time the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) was established in 1936, it was clear that for any national radio system to be successful it would have to be able to produce national *and* local content in *both* official languages. The process of creating a national radio network showed that in order to have a popular position on language and regional representation, it was best to have no position at all.

Clemson University professor Ray Barfield argues that the United States effectively overcame regional divides through radio, saying that ‘city’ broadcasts were welcomed in the Deep South and quenched a thirst “for something beyond the familiar landscape and the

rituals of working and social life.”¹ There were some issues associated with different regions coming together for the first time. For example, University of Washington professor Susan Douglas notes that the diversity of pronunciation in the United States led each region to believe the others were speaking incorrectly.² Such minor problems (by 1930 NBC and CBS had a standard of radio pronunciation) did not overshadow the positive impact of linking the United States through the new medium and early attempts in Canada tried to simulate that success. Canada’s two national railway companies, the Canadian National Railway (CNR) and Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), both experimented with radio networks for their passengers. Robert Bothwell and William Kilbourn argue that this was not simply a tactic used to increase passengers as both railways looked to bind regions together in order to “help create a sense of nationhood.”³ But what that ‘sense’ was, was not clear. McGill University’s Marc Raboy argues that language blurred English Canada’s view of Canada as a struggling nation because in Quebec, Canada was the oppressor.⁴ Therefore, radio’s task was not simply bridging the geographic divide of the country, but also trying to come to terms with a mixed national vision. As communication expert Robert Fortner argues, radio raised serious moral questions about nationhood and separateness. Was it more important to be French or English Canadian rather than simply Canadian – assuming ‘Canadian-ness’ even existed?⁵

¹ Ray Barfield, *Listening to Radio, 1920-1950* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996), 6.

² Susan J. Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination, from Amos ‘n’ Andy and Edward R. Murrow to Wolfman Jack and Howard Stern* (New York: Times Books, 1999), 102.

³ Robert Bothwell and William Kilbourn, *C.D Howe: A Biography* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1979), 100.

⁴ Marc Raboy, *Missed Opportunities: The Story of Canada’s Broadcasting Policy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1990), 19.

⁵ Robert S. Fortner, *Radio, Morality and Culture: Britain, Canada, and the United States, 1919-1945* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 130.

Before the federal government involved itself in radio in 1928, broadcasting in Canada was largely reserved for those living in cities and towns. People in rural areas of the country, especially in the West, were often unable to pick up any signal – and if they could it would usually be American. The unfortunate part of rural Western Canadians being unable to receive Canadian programmes was that it was they who most needed the service because of their relative isolation from the rest of the country. The official historian of the CAB, T.J Allard, argues that the “sparse population, vast distances and the harsh Prairie climate” made broadcasting “infinitely more significant in Western Canada in the early years than it had been in most other parts of the country.”⁶ This was not just a problem for those living in the West who wanted access to Canadian programming, but also to nationalists in the East looking to foster greater national unity. Elton Johnson’s 1924 *Maclean’s* article titled “Canada’s Radio Consciousness” argued that radio in Canada was not doing enough to promote national unity. He pointed out that “the man who can swing from Cleveland to New York to Montreal to Zion City in five minutes must inevitably lose some of his narrow-minded, parochial instincts,” and, therefore, there needed to be more inter-provincial broadcasting: “The result [of exclusively local broadcasting] is that the Ontario fan, as far as radio education goes, retains his Ontario point of view with only an occasional interruption from speakers and artists in other provinces.”⁷

For major events there were some early attempts to link the country together. The famous Jack Dempsey and Gene Tunney heavyweight fight in September 1927 was a classic example. Fifty-five stations across North America networked to broadcast the fight, with people in normally diverse areas simultaneously listening in. For

⁶ T.J Allard, *The C.A.B Story, 1926-1976: Private Broadcasting in Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Association of Broadcasters, 1976), 14.

⁷ Elton Johnson, “Canada’s Radio Consciousness: How Can Radio Be Best Utilised to Inculcate National Ideals and Foster National Unity?” *Maclean’s*, October 15, 1924, 52.

example, people in Yorkton, Saskatchewan huddled into garages and restaurants to hear the blow-by-blow call of the fight just as their compatriots could do in Toronto bars.⁸ The CNR, whose radio network was more extensive than the CPR, played a key role in establishing the national hook-ups for these events. The CNR also took the lead in linking twenty-three stations across the country to broadcast the Canadian Diamond Jubilee celebrations from Ottawa in 1927. Wayne Schmalz, an expert in Saskatchewan's broadcasting history, called it the CNR's most important contribution to Canadian nationalism.⁹ Interestingly, the Jubilee Celebration, despite its great success, lacked French-language content. While it is not clear if any of the politicians who addressed the nation spoke in French, the schedule of events included only one French-language song, 'Vive la Canadienne,' during the day's official broadcast. In the evening's Carillon selection, which began at 10:30, the 'Bytown Quartette' presented three French songs, 'Youp, Youp, Sur la Rivière,' 'En Roulant ma Boule,' and 'Alouette.'¹⁰ The group was last on the schedule and, therefore, it is likely that they did not perform until well after midnight, meaning a large portion of the country probably slept through their performance. This lack of French during the broadcast does not appear to have been an issue, as the joy of the celebration and the success in linking the country far over-shadowed any potential discontent from French Canadians. One possibility is that the lack of any documentation dealing with complaints about the broadcast from French Canadians is a result of the programme's success. Even if there were criticisms of the broadcast, it was clear they would fall on deaf ears.

Given the success of the Jubilee broadcast, the Mackenzie King government began to explore the possibility of establishing a national

⁸ Wayne Schmalz, *On Air: Radio in Saskatchewan* (Regina: Couteau Books, 1990), 53-54.

⁹ Schmalz, 45.

¹⁰ Diamond Jubilee of Confederation Programme of National Celebration in Ottawa, July 1, 1927. LAC RG 33, Vo. 1, Programme of Celebration Ottawa.

broadcaster similar to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). A Royal Commission was established and seventy-three year old Canadian Bank of Commerce President Sir John Aird was named as its Chairman. Aird and his fellow Commissioners, *Ottawa Citizen* editor Charles Bowman and Director General of Technical Education in Quebec Augustin Frigon, toured the country to discover how Canadians felt about the burgeoning medium. The Commission was the product of a government beginning to realize that in order for broadcasting to foster national unity, all Canadians, and especially those in rural areas, needed access to the system.¹¹ Arguing that expanding radio's reach to rural Canada was the sole regional factor in the expansion of broadcasting, however, would discount important local considerations. As Radio-Canada historian Greg Marc Nielson notes, there was a double cultural context, composed of regional and national interests, in which the birth of radio must be situated.¹² Most of the regional concern came from Quebec, but the Maritime Provinces were also hesitant to sign on. The key for the Maritimes was the retention of local stations because of their importance to the region's economy. In addition to using radio for at-sea communication, fishers relied on local stations for weather and fishing updates, which they feared may be lost in a nationalized radio system.¹³ While still concerned, some in the Maritimes believed that national radio might actually help local stations, with the *Halifax Chronicle* reporting in 1928 that national radio "not only would be of advantage to the users of radio throughout the country but would place the broadcasting enterprise on solid and permanent foundation as an important public utility," thereby securing the local station's role as a

¹¹ James L. Hall, *Radio Canada International: Voice of a Middle Power* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1997), 5.

¹² Greg Marc Nielson, *Le Canada de Radio-Canada: Sociologique Critique et Dialogisme Culturel* (Toronto: Editions de Gref, 1994), 59.

¹³ Mary Vipond, *Listening In: The First Decade of Canadian Broadcasting, 1922-1932* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 216.

key source of information.¹⁴ Even some in Toronto recognized this need, with one witness at the Toronto hearing of the Commission saying that “the West is just as much entitled to service as the East,” and that the government needs to overcome the “handicap” of the large unpopulated area between North Bay and Fort William, Ontario to achieve a national system.¹⁵

Such interest in maintaining local stations was an interesting aspect of the Aird Commission. While the Commission did hear plenty of support for national radio, it also heard presentations requesting the continuation of local stations. For example, the Sherbrooke, Board of Trade called for a national system of high-powered stations controlled by municipal governments, which would help local businesses sell products.¹⁶ “In the interest of the radio public,” the Western Ontario Better Radio Club called for a three-tiered system of broadcasting, allowing for national, regional, and local broadcasts.¹⁷ Such a system would allow for a national voice, but maintain, and in certain situations legitimize, local concerns and sensitivities. For example, a listener in Alberta is not likely to be overly concerned about fishing conditions off the coast of Nova Scotia, but if local stations closed in favour of a national hook-up, that information would be heard in Alberta just as Prairie crop conditions would be heard in British Columbia. By allowing local programming, regional interests could be addressed while national airtime could be reserved for wider issues.

There were also concerns about programme content. For example, W.H Cross, writing from Bolton, Ontario, supported local

¹⁴ “National Broadcasting,” *Halifax Chronicle*, April 14, 1928. LAC RG 42, Vol. 1075, Press Reports.

¹⁵ Transcript of Toronto Hearing of Royal Commission on Radio Broadcasting, May 17, 1929, 15. LAC RG 33, Vol. 1, 227-9-9.

¹⁶ Summary of Public Hearings of Royal Commission on Radio Broadcasting held at Sherbrooke, May 28, 1929. LAC RG 33, Vol. 1, 227-10-5.

¹⁷ The Western Ontario Better Radio Club to Donald Manson, March 12, 1929. LAC RG 42, Vol. 1077, 227-9-3.

stations, saying, “Nearly all the entertainment presented from Toronto stations is beneath contempt, and foreign visitors may well be pardoned for considering us a nation of morons.”¹⁸ Cross felt that Toronto stations aired too much music, especially jazz, and felt his local stations were better suited to broadcast programmes that met his taste. In addition, at the Halifax hearing the representative of the Halifax County Radio Association, in supporting a national system, was quick to note that “we have no desire to do anything to interfere with our local station[s]; they are filling a much needed want.”¹⁹

The national unity potential of radio, however, made it nearly impossible for the Commission to call exclusively for local stations. For broadcasting to be an effective instrument of national unity all Canadians needed access and only the federal government could provide that.²⁰ The *Hamilton Spectator* believed that the benefits of a national system would be two-fold. It would “bring the sister provinces closer together, while the United States and the world would hear Canada on the air.”²¹ The CAB was sensitive to the regional realities of Canada in the 1920s, however, and stressed that any government body dealing with radio had to represent all parts of the country, lest one region be ignored.²² For its part, the CNR took pride in already establishing a national network while respecting local sensitivities – informing the Commission it had “[maintained] local staffs, [engaged] local talent, etc,” with the biggest product of remaining local being the

¹⁸ W.H Cross to Donald Manson, January 7, 1929. LAC RG 42, Vol. 1077, 227-9-3.

¹⁹ Halifax Hearing of the Royal Commission on Radio Broadcasting, June 17, 1929. LAC, RG 42, 227-12-5.

²⁰ Vipond, *Listening In*, 219.

²¹ “Broadcasting,” *Hamilton Spectator*, August 17, 1928. LAC RG 42, Vol. 1075, Press Reports.

²² The Canadian Association of Broadcasters to the Air Commission, July 30, 1929. LAC RG 42, Vol. 1077, 227-9-3.

development of a French-language chain from eastern Ontario all the way through the province of Quebec.²³

Perhaps unknowingly, the CNR clearly outlined a critical factor in maintaining local stations – the need for French-language programming. As much as bilingual broadcasting was a hot topic in Quebec, French Canadian groups from across the country were also calling for any national system to carry French from coast-to-coast. For example, the French Canadian Association of Alberta informed the Commission that “in order to indicate the bilingual characteristic of the Canadian nation and the equal rights of the French and English in the Dominion, the announcing of each number on the programme should be made in English and French.”²⁴ The Association d’Education des canadiens-français du Manitoba went further in calling for “un programme de Français par semaine.”²⁵ These types of arguments, however, were few and far between for the Aird Commission. More frequently, discussion dealing with regional issues focused on establishing a national network, which would remain sensitive to local realities. As Michael Nolan points out, the correspondence between Commission secretary Donald Manson and Aird indicates “an eagerness to harness broadcasting for the purpose of nation-building.”²⁶ Given the strong pressures from all sides, the Commission’s final report did not take a firm stance on regional representation. While the report does recommend a national system, it does not do so at the expense of local stations. As historian of Canadian broadcasting policy Mary Vipond argues, the final report’s emphasis on updating technical

²³ Memorandum Submitted By the Canadian National Railways to the Royal Commission on Radio Broadcasting in Canada, May 29, 1929, 4. LAC RG 33, Vol. 1, 227-10-1.

²⁴ French-Canadian Association of Alberta to Donald Manson, February 20, 1929. LAC RG 42, Vol. 1077, 227-6-3.

²⁵ Association d’Education Des canadiens-français du Manitoba to Donald Manson, June 13, 1929. LAC RG 42, Vol. 1077, 227-8-3.

²⁶ Michael Nolan, *Foundations: Alan Plaunt and the Early Days of CBC Radio* (Toronto: CBC Enterprises, 1986), 63.

equipment and expanding coverage was a means of comforting the Prairies and Maritimes, where concern over local stations existed.²⁷ Manson would later admit that the lack of specifics was intentional, telling the 1932 Parliamentary Committee on radio that “when we made our report we left it very general. We did not attempt to put any cut and dried plan into it.”²⁸

The Commission’s final report was also reluctant to take a firm stance on the question of which level of government should be responsible for broadcasting. As Vipond points out, the federal government was charged with regulating transmissions, wavelengths, and other matters affecting more than one province, while provincial governments were given control of programming.²⁹ During the Commission’s cross-country tour, seven of the nine provincial governments resolved to enter into negotiations with the federal government in order to organize radio for the public good – the only two hold outs were Quebec and New Brunswick. The New Brunswick government simply felt that broadcasting should be under provincial jurisdiction, informing the Commission that:

the Government of New Brunswick, while insisting that constitutionally the Provinces are not subject to any legislative or executive interference, in dealing with the subject of broadcasting, except in time of war, is of the opinion that co-operation between the Provinces and the Dominion would be beneficial in promoting National mutual understanding and education, and the Government is willing to enter into conference to

²⁷ Vipond, *Listening In*, 222.

²⁸ Donald Mason, quoted in Alex Toogood, *1919-1969: Canadian Broadcasting in Transition* (Ottawa, Canadian Association of Broadcasters, 1969), 24.

²⁹ Vipond, *Listening In*, 251.

ascertain the best method by which these objects may be attained.³⁰

Therefore, New Brunswick left the door open to a federal system under the right circumstances. The Quebec government, on the other hand, did not. In 1929 Quebec passed an act enabling the establishment of a provincially controlled system and in 1931 took control of all licensing issues within the province. The federal government took the question to the Canadian Supreme Court, successfully arguing that the ‘peace, order, and good government’ clause of the British North America Act gave the federal government control over communications.³¹ Even though the federal government successfully reclaimed control over broadcasting, Charles Bowman recalls a conversation with the new Prime Minister in which R.B Bennett expressed his belief that the provincial versus federal problem would ultimately have to be resolved by the Privy Council.³²

Bennett was right as the case did eventually find its way to the Privy Council. This time, however, New Brunswick and Ontario offered financial and legal support to the provincial jurisdiction cause. New Brunswick’s involvement was not surprising given its original attitude, but the Ontario government had previously been open to the idea of federal control. University of British Columbia professor Margaret Prang argues that Ontario was actually the “key battleground” between the two main lobby groups, the CAB which supported private broadcasting and the CRL which supported public broadcasting. Quebec was also a contentious area between the groups, but with nearly half of the Conservative members in the House of Commons coming

³⁰ Government of New Brunswick to Aird Commission, February 15, 1929. LAC RG 42, Vol. 1077, 227-11-2.

³¹ Vipond, *Listening In*, 253.

³² Charles Bowman, *Ottawa Editor: The Memoirs of Charles A. Bowman* (Sidney, BC: Gray’s Publishing, 1966), 135.

from Ontario, most of whom supported private enterprise, Ontario was the primary focus.³³ In addition, Ontario, particularly the Windsor-Toronto-Ottawa corridor, was the best serviced area of the country and it is likely that some provincial officials were wary of a possible backlash if that system were disrupted.

Also well served by private broadcasting, Quebec objected to federal control mostly on the grounds of language. Vipond notes that Quebecers tended to be sceptical of English Canadian motives and were concerned with whether French-language service would be provided by a federal radio system.³⁴ Given the lack of French during the Diamond Jubilee broadcast, these concerns were warranted. Some have argued, however, that Quebec Premier Louis-Alexandre Taschereau had more selfish motivations for fighting over radio. Raboy argues that Quebec's 1931 legislation over licences was "the Taschereau government ... seeking to stake out a position in the field."³⁵ Prang argues that radio simply became part of Taschereau's war with the federal government, which dealt primarily with how to best utilize the resources of the St Lawrence River.³⁶ In addition, Austin Weir notes that radio was an opportunity for Quebec to further distance itself from Ottawa.³⁷ It was perhaps in their haste to show up the federal government that Taschereau and his staff chose to ignore their strongest point in the case before the Privy Council, education.

Given that education falls under provincial jurisdiction in Canada, Quebec would have been best to argue the educational benefits of radio to strengthen its case, for which it would have had plenty of material. Education groups, along with the Roman Catholic Church and

³³ Margaret Prang, "The Origins of Public Broadcasting in Canada." *Canadian Historical Review* XLVI, no. 1 (1965): 15.

³⁴ Vipond, *Listening In*, 239.

³⁵ Raboy, 33.

³⁶ Prang, 22.

³⁷ E. Austin Weir, *The Struggle for National Broadcasting in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1965), 110.

a majority of the Protestant ones, felt that radio was best used when it was informing the nation.³⁸ During its travels, the Aird Commission heard plenty of statements dealing with radio's educational potential. During the hearing at Sherbrooke, Quebec, for instance, Aird expressed his belief that a weekly educational lecture "would be very beneficial" and his belief "that the question of a service for educational purposes will be a very important one in the minds of the Government." In addition, CFRB, Toronto's largest station, presented the Aird Commission with three forms of educational broadcasting: Government Departmental Broadcasting, University Broadcasting, and Public and High School Broadcasting.³⁹ Rather than follow this line of argument, which most historians agree would have been Quebec's best course, the case became a constitutional battle between Quebec's Radio Act, the federal Radiotelegraph Act of 1913 and the International Radio-Telegraph Convention of 1927.⁴⁰

Concerned over the possibilities associated with a decision in favour of provincial authority, the CRL became involved in the case by sending CRL member and Montreal lawyer Brooke Claxton to London to argue the case for federal control. CRL leaders had previously supported vagueness on the provincial-federal question over fear of losing critical support in Quebec. With the possibility of losing a national system, however, they felt they had little choice but to intervene.⁴¹ Through their strategic ambiguity, the CRL could rely on support from across the country in their efforts at the Privy Council. The CRL was careful about the measure, as Graham Spry consulted with prominent Quebec attorney and future Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent and Georges Pelletier, editor of *Le Devoir*, before sending

³⁸ Prang, 21.

³⁹ CFRB Submission to Aird Commission, May 17, 1929. LAC RG 33, Vol. 1, 227-9-9.

⁴⁰ Raboy, 34.

⁴¹ Prang, 13.

Claxton to London. Spry later wrote that both St. Laurent and Pelletier had given their support to the CRL's decision.⁴²

In the end, the federal government retained control over radio. Nolan argues that the critical factor was a clause in section 92 of the British North America Act that "exempts Lines of Steam or other ships, railways, canals, [and] telegraphs from provincial jurisdiction."⁴³ While the case cleared the way for the federal government to enact legislation over radio, Raboy argues that it had larger cultural implications. He believes that "the struggle took on the allure of a holy conflict over the very nature of Confederation" with the decision resting at the centre of Canadian dualism.⁴⁴ He continues by noting that "analysts of the day and since have seen the issue as more than the question of radio as a turning point in the shift in Canadian federalism towards Ottawa and away from the provinces."⁴⁵ While this shift to federal authority had wide ranging implications, for the purposes of this analysis the most significant impact came in the form of the federal government's new ability to proceed with radio legislation.

Part of the CRL's success in backing the federal government came from its broad support, which was buoyed by its vague stance on language. Raboy notes that Spry and Plaunt initially focused on Quebec for support, then expanded into the other regions of Canada.⁴⁶ Nolan argues that this was the best course of action for the duo; especially since Plaunt was raised in Quebec and maintained plenty of contacts and credibility within French Canada.⁴⁷ Some of their early supporters were influential Quebecers like Dr. Edouard Montpetit, the Secretary

⁴² Graham Spry, "Public Policy and Private Pressures: The Canadian Radio League 1930-6 and Countervailing Power," in *On Canada: Essays in Honour of Frank H. Underhill*, eds. Frank Hawkins Underhill and Norman Penlington (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 25.

⁴³ Nolan, 84.

⁴⁴ Raboy, 35.

⁴⁵ Raboy, 35.

⁴⁶ Raboy, 31.

⁴⁷ Nolan, 70.

General of the University of Montreal, Canon Emile Chartier, Vice Rector of the University of Montreal, and, as previously mentioned, *Le Devoir* editor Georges Pelletier.⁴⁸ Once they felt they had secured adequate support in Quebec, Spry and Plaunt turned their attention to other regions. Spry's position as National Secretary of the Canadian Clubs played a significant role in the Prairies and Maritimes and he was able to secure a large number of volunteers to rally support in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.⁴⁹ In addition, Halifax lawyer Hector McInnis and Dalhousie Professor C.H Mercer organized support in the Maritimes, although with limited success.⁵⁰ Vipond notes that the CRL actually opposed provincial control of programming, which was a key point of the Aird Report, but, despite their support for the federal government at the Privy Council, maintained a policy of silence on the issue because they felt it would have a negative impact on their regional support.⁵¹

For their part, the CAB also tried to elicit more national support – frequently meeting with the Western Association of Broadcasters (WAB) in unsuccessful attempts to bridge the gaps between the groups and become a more national organization.⁵² Hector Charlesworth, who would become Chairman of the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission (CRBC) in 1932, believed that it was the narrow support of the CAB that minimized its impact, arguing that “the weakness of their case lay in the fact that they spoke for interests centralized in Toronto, Montreal and the United States. The interests of Western and Eastern Canada hardly entered into their counsels.”⁵³ For example, the Ontario Radio League, which supported the CAB, argued against

⁴⁸ Prang, 11.

⁴⁹ Prang, 10.

⁵⁰ Prang, 10.

⁵¹ Vipond, *Listening In*, 233.

⁵² Allard, 14.

⁵³ Hector Charlesworth, *I'm Telling You: Being the Further Candid Chronicles of Hector Charlesworth* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1937), 37.

government ownership “largely on the ground that listeners in southern Ontario should not be penalized to pay for service to outlying regions.”⁵⁴ Such fears in Central Canada were not completely unwarranted. Given that a majority of the population resided in Southern Ontario and Quebec, if tax money were used to establish a national network, Central Canadians would be footing more of the bill for national service than anyone while receiving little to no upgrade in their radio service. A 1930 quote from the Telephone Association of Canada estimated the annual cost of a national system⁵⁵ at \$535,000, regardless of the number of broadcasting hours and did not include the costs of programming.⁵⁶ With the deepening Depression, people in the Windsor-Toronto-Montreal corridor were not inclined to support the additional government expense with no expectation of better service. By being forced by its influential Ontario members to take a firm stance against a national system, the CAB was unable to get the diverse regional support enjoyed by the more indefinite CRL.

In addition to the scepticism from Southern Ontario and Quebec, the Nova Scotia government expressed concerns that national radio would destroy local broadcasting. They believed the community element of broadcasting was too important to allow it to disappear.⁵⁷ Nova Scotians simply had to look to British communities to see the impact of nationalized broadcasting. British broadcasting historians Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff argue that national programming could sometimes harm regional identities: “though something like a common national culture and identity was given expression in moments

⁵⁴ Vipond, *Listening In*, 262.

⁵⁵ The network identified in the estimate connected stations at Truro, Nova Scotia; Campbellton, New Brunswick; Three Rivers, Quebec; Peterborough, London, Chappleau, and Fort William, Ontario; Winnipeg, Manitoba; Regina, Saskatchewan; Calgary, Alberta; Vancouver, British Columbia.

⁵⁶ The Telephone Association of Canada to Commander Edwards, July 21, 1930. LAC 42, Vol. 1077, 227-2-8.

⁵⁷ Raboy, 41.

of ritual celebration, it was often at the expense of different cultures and identities within the imposed unity of the UK and its national broadcasting service.”⁵⁸ Despite these fears, there was no organized opposition anywhere in the Maritimes and the Nova Scotia government was simply drowned out by enthusiastic calls from the West for a national system.⁵⁹ Bennett also supported nationalization as a means of linking the regions, confiding to Charlesworth that “It does not seem right that in Canada the towns should be preferred to the countryside, or the prosperous communities to those less fortunate. Happily, however, under this system [public ownership] there is no need for discrimination; all may be served alike.”⁶⁰

A critical aspect of regional representation was language, but there was surprisingly little discussion during the Privy Council case or the 1932 Special Parliamentary Committee on Radio hearings. Spry testified to the Committee that French broadcasts to Western Canada should be considered, but the director of Montreal station CKAC Arthur Dupont argued that a national system would inevitably be English and as a result “would cause national strife.”⁶¹ And while Premier Taschereau continued to oppose national broadcasting, the potential of providing French programming to the half million French Canadians outside of Quebec proved an appealing argument to French Canadian leaders.⁶² When Bennett assured Liberal critic P.J.A Cardin that the 1932 Radio Act’s provision for provincial commissioners would be adhered to, it appeared as though a compromise between national unity and regional identities had been reached.⁶³ Prang argues

⁵⁸ Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting: Volume One, 1922-1939, Serving the Nation* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 303.

⁵⁹ Prang, 21.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Charlesworth, 40.

⁶¹ Raboy, 44.

⁶² Prang, 19.

⁶³ Raboy, 46.

that “in the 1932 Committee, regional and racial tensions yielded to national unity.”⁶⁴

The tensions did not yield for long, however, as the concerns and trepidation over regional identity were quickly replaced by outright anger over the CRBC’s policy on French programming. In his June 9, 1933 column in the *Toronto Telegram*, famed radio writer Jim Hunter wrote that he was encouraged that recent CRBC programmes had been broadcast entirely in English, easing his fear that he would have to learn French in order to listen to his radio-set.⁶⁵ Hunter’s fears came from the growing pressure on the Commission to expand its French-language service outside of Quebec to a national audience. In early February 1933, the Association d’Education des Canadiens-français du Manitoba, with the support of the Saskatchewan French-language newspaper *La Liberté*, wrote to the CRBC calling for French programming because “depuis Halifax et Charlottetown jusqu’aux Montagnes Rocheuses, il est des groupes compacts et nombreux de Canadiens dont la français est la langue maternelle.”⁶⁶ Later that month the Saskatchewan branch of the Association Catholique Franco-Canadienne complained to the Commission that a recent concert series had been broadcast entirely in English and called it “infiniment regrettable de constater que jusqu’ici pas un seul mot de français n’a été prononcé aux concerts de la Commission.”⁶⁷ In response to this letter the CRBC informed the group that “la Commission de la Radiodiffusion entend respecter tous les droits légitimes du français au Canada, et, à cette fin, il a été décidé

⁶⁴ Prang, 31.

⁶⁵ Jim Hunter, “Tuning In With Jim Hunter,” *The Telegram (Toronto)*, June 9, 1933. LAC Microfilm Reel T-819.

⁶⁶ L’Association d’Education des Canadiens-français du Manitoba to Hector Charlesworth, February 8, 1933. Saskatchewan Archives Board, R 128, No. 75.

⁶⁷ L’Association Catholique Franco-Canadienne to Hector Charlesworth, February 25, 1933. Saskatchewan Archives Board, R 128, No. 75.

que des programmes entièrement français seront irradiée le plûs tot et le plus souvent possible a travers tout le pays.”⁶⁸

Fulfilling this promise required the Commission to be the first body to create a firm policy on French programming. By May 1933, Thomas Maher, who was in charge of programming for the CRBC, had made the decision to broadcast one hour a night, or three to four hours a week, in French.⁶⁹ While this decision was celebrated in French-speaking regions, some English Canadians protested the decision. Neilson notes that the reaction was particularly strong in regions without a significant French Canadian presence.⁷⁰ The *Toronto Telegram* accused Quebec of grabbing the CRBC “to sell the rest of the country the idea they had talent.”⁷¹ Ellis argues that the ensuing storm of protest came particularly from Western Canada, with MPs, Protestant groups, and individual listeners leading the charge and seriously damaging the CRBC’s reputation.⁷² Weir adds that the complaints were strictly the result of the programmes’ language, as their overall quality was actually quite good.⁷³ Despite the complaints, the Société du Parler Français au Canada wrote to Maher in May 1933 calling for more French programming and equal treatment of the nation’s two official languages.⁷⁴

Weir also notes that the language’s association with Roman Catholicism proved to be another problem, as “without knowing the depth of religious bigotry in Canada [in the 1920s and 1930s], no one could appreciate the extraordinary reaction to these French-language

⁶⁸ Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission to l’Association Catholique Franco-Canadienne, March 7, 1933. Saskatchewan Archives Board, R 128, No. 75.

⁶⁹ Raboy, 51.

⁷⁰ Nielson, 81.

⁷¹ “The French Slant,” *The Telegram (Toronto)*, June 12, 1933. LAC Microfilm Reel T-819.

⁷² Ellis, 10.

⁷³ Weir, 149.

⁷⁴ Societe du Parler Francais Au Canada to Thomas Maher, May 8, 1933. Saskatchewan Archives Board, R 128, No. 75.

broadcasts.”⁷⁵ And the CRBC, nor anyone involved in broadcasting, certainly did not appreciate, or expect, such strong reaction. In fact during the Aird Commission’s Sherbrooke hearing, Aird reported that:

We had very emphatic statements from Western Canada that they would like to hear more from Quebec and the Maritime Provinces. Music for instance and many of them would like to hear something of the early history of the discovery of Quebec. Those are lectures which would be very interesting and instructive to the new settlers coming into Canada.⁷⁶

Thomas Maher, the target of many of the attacks, sent a memo to Bennett in September 1933 explaining that his decision to initiate the French-language broadcasts was because the Commission had been “deluged daily with petitions, requests and letters of all kinds asking that the French language be given due and fair consideration in our programmes.”⁷⁷ Two days later, Charlesworth sent out an internal CRBC memo informing employees that the original decision to air French-language programmes came after demands from groups in the Prairies, going on to note that “public men did not take the agitation seriously and thought them a contribution to national unity.”⁷⁸ As Weir suggests, perhaps the Commissioners did not appreciate the severity of complaints, or perhaps they were buying into the few letters they received thanking them for the French-language broadcasts. On such

⁷⁵ Weir, 150.

⁷⁶ Transcript of Sherbrooke Hearing of Royal Commission on Radio Broadcasting, May 28, 1929, 4. LAC RG 33, Vol. 1, 227-10-5.

⁷⁷ Thomas Maher Memo to R.B Bennett, September 14, 1933. LAC Bennett Papers Microfilm Reel, M-1292.

⁷⁸ Memorandum from the Chairman of the Radio Broadcasting Commission re French Programmes, September 16, 1933. LAC Bennett Papers Microfilm Reel, M-1292.

letter came from the Association Catholique Franco-Canadienne, which ensured that it wrote Charlesworth to be “certain qu’elle sera hautement appréciée de tous les radiophiles de l’Ouest.”⁷⁹

Despite the CRBC’s belief that the protests were not too serious, listeners continued to barrage the Commission with complaints. Former anchor of *The National* Knowlton Nash notes that some in English Canada were insulted by the broadcasts. One Regina citizen complained to Bennett that nobody listened to CRBC stations anymore because of French:

At the last General Election you were elected as Premier of Canada as a result of tens of thousands voting for you regardless of party on the distinct understanding you were 100% for the upholding and maintenance of British traditions...Our great trouble worrying these voters was the widespread use of bilingualism on Government [forms] and notices outside the Province of Quebec, quite contrary to the British North America Act...Bilingualism was certainly a definite issue in the minds of these voters in Western Canada, and so far, although nearly four years have gone by, apparently no steps have been taken to stop this irritation. In fact, matters are getting worse, especially so since the Canadian Radio Commission came into being, with its French programmes and announcements. Furthermore, our Liberal newspapers, by means of editorials and writeups [sic] on each form as it comes through, are holding you and your supporters up to ridicule.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ L’Association Catholique Franco-Canadienne to Hector Charlesworth, October 7, 1933. Saskatchewan Archives Board, R 128, No. 75.

⁸⁰ G. Milnes of Regina, Saskatchewan to R.B Bennett, March 26, 1934. LAC Bennett Papers, Microfilm Reel M-1293.

Nash goes on to argue that the belief that the government was using radio to promote official bilingualism led to increased prejudice, bigotry, and fear rather than promote national unity as was originally intended.⁸¹ Similarly, Wayne Schmalz discusses Conservative MP for Regina, Saskatchewan Frank Turnbull (who had ties to the Ku Klux Klan) and his argument that French was not an official language and by forcing it on the public “the CRBC was undermining its own purpose to foster unity.”⁸² The Regina branch of the KKK expressed its belief to the Prime Minister that Quebec had too great a representation on the Commission and was not impressed that two Roman Catholics had been appointed.⁸³ In the summer of 1933, Charlesworth went west to try and settle the anger over French-language broadcasting. Raboy notes that he even met with representatives of the KKK in Saskatchewan, but on the whole his trip was unsuccessful.⁸⁴ As Schmalz notes, there was little hope for Charlesworth because “the CRBC’s French programmes fuelled the passions of those who resented paying for something they couldn’t understand and inflamed bigots who needed a pretext for their anger.”⁸⁵

Despite these objections, the Commission’s first annual report in 1934 described a positive impact on national unity, saying “by the daily exchange of radio programmes between East and West the geographical barrier of distance is being surmounted and in this way there tends to be a disappearance of parochialism and the development of a vigorous national perspective. Obviously national radio is an

⁸¹ Nash, 100.

⁸² Schmalz, 49.

⁸³ A. Clasp of Regina Branch #1 of KKK to R.B Bennett, June 9, 1932. LAC Bennett Papers, Microfilm Reel M-1292.

⁸⁴ Raboy, 52.

⁸⁵ Schmalz, 50.

effective instrument in nation building.”⁸⁶ While such a statement implied greater success than the CRBC had actually achieved, there were some who supported this view. For example, in June 1934, Leo Belhumeur, Secretary General of the Association Canadienne-français de l’Alberta, wrote Horace Stovin, then Western Director of Programmes, to congratulate the Commission on its recent French broadcasts and encouraged it to produce a French programme in commemoration of the 400th anniversary of Jacques Cartier’s discovery of Canada.⁸⁷ In September 1934, J.H Daignault, Secretary-General of the Association d’Education des Canadiens-français du Manitoba, wrote to Charlesworth telling him that groups such as the KKK and Orange Order were “anti-patriotique” and that all true Canadians were looking forward to the upcoming Jacques Cartier broadcast.⁸⁸ Even though this type of positive sentiment towards the Commission existed over language, the vast majority of letters condemned the French broadcasts.

In 1934 a special Parliamentary Committee was established to examine the state of the CRBC. The CAB’s submission to the committee complained not only of the CRBC’s insistence on French programming, but also on the quality: “The practice of having [CRBC] announcers speak to British-Canadians in what is supposed to be the French language, but which actually is, in most cases, a travesty of that beautiful tongue, still continues, and is not fostering the *entente cordiale*.”⁸⁹ Despite this attack and the clear public interest in the issue of language in broadcasting, concerns over partisanship overshadowed all other issues during the committee. In fact, the CRL’s submission did

⁸⁶ Annual Report of the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission for the Fiscal Year Ending March 31, 1934, 9-10.

⁸⁷ Leo Belhumeur to Horace Stovin, June 15, 1934. Saskatchewan Archives Board, R 128, No. 75.

⁸⁸ J.H Daignault to Hector Charlesworth, September 18, 1934. Saskatchewan Archives Board, R 128, No. 75.

⁸⁹ Memorandum Submitted by R.W Ashcroft, President, Dominion Broadcasters Association to the House Committee on Radio Broadcasting, February 1934.

not even mention French broadcasting, nor did the committee's final report. Despite this, the hearings furthered the debate over language broadcasting. Raboy notes that following the committee's report, some in French Canada began taking opposition to the broadcasts as opposition to French in Canada, while some English Canadians viewed them as an instrument of French domination.⁹⁰ The Union Nationale Indépendente des Débardeurs de l'Île de Montréal Inc. wrote the Prime Minister during the hearings to object that "injurious and insulting words have been pronounced against the french [sic] language which is that of the pioneers of this Dominion," and to "hope that as prime minister you will see that ... the offended part will be satisfied."⁹¹

Only two months earlier, however, a *Regina Daily Star* poll found that 87% of respondents opposed French broadcasts. The paper reported that "it was easily apparent the main objection to the Radio Commission, and in more than 40 per cent of the poll it was the only objection, was the introduction of French language announcements."⁹² As Raboy states, "as early as 1934, Canadian public broadcasting served two audiences, two markets, and two publics with one policy, one mandate, and one institution."⁹³ The great irony of the anger towards the CRBC was that if the CRBC had established an English-only programming policy the protests would have come from French Canada. The CRBC's downfall was not necessarily in its policy, but the fact that, unlike the CRL and Aird Commission, it was forced to take a firm stance, which ensured that it would upset a large portion of the country. Simply put, strategic ambiguity was not an option for the CRBC and it paid the price. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation

⁹⁰ Raboy, 54.

⁹¹ Union Nationale Independente des Debardeurs de l'Île de Montreal Inc. to R.B Bennett, April 24, 1934. LAC Bennett Papers, Microfilm Reel M-1293.

⁹² "Disband Radio Commission is Wish of Fans," *Regina Daily Star*, February 10, 1934, 2.

⁹³ Raboy, 52.

(CBC) replaced the CRBC in November 1936 with a much larger budget to help implement a much more ambiguous language policy

Interestingly, towards the end of its existence and into the early CBC days, the CRBC actually received plenty of credit for binding the country together through radio. The first instance came in a February 1934 article in the *Toronto Mail and Empire* titled “Remarkable Achievements of Canadian Radio,” in which the paper credited the CRBC with establishing a national network in so little time and serving Canadians “from the Atlantic to the Pacific.”⁹⁴ Both the Canadian Marconi Company and Red Cross Society of Canada sent letters to Bennett prior to the election to officially thank the Commission for bringing the country together.⁹⁵ Finally, in 1936 the Canadian Association of Advertising Agencies, one of the groups originally opposed to nationalization, admitted that the “benefit of governmental participation in broadcasting [the CRBC] has been particularly evident in the more remote districts” of Canada.⁹⁶ Such language suggests a generosity as when a person dies. All is forgiven and nobody wants to speak ill of the dead. For all its faults the CRBC was instrumental in establishing Canada’s national network. Through its policies and programming the CRBC discovered that for any national broadcaster to be successful it had to offer programmes in both languages while simultaneously being able to provide local content.

J.L. Granatstein and Graham Rawlinson, in ranking Mackenzie King the third most influential Canadian of the 20th century, note that he “knew that French and English Canadians had to get along,” and

⁹⁴ “Remarkable Achievements of Canadian Radio,” *The Mail and Empire (Toronto)*, February 21, 1934. LAC Microfilm Reel, T-819.

⁹⁵ M.M. Elliot to R.B. Bennett, January 9, 1935. LAC Bennett Papers, Microfilm Reel M-1293. Red Cross Society of Canada to R.B. Bennett, May 27, 1935. LAC Bennett Papers, Microfilm Reel M-1292.

⁹⁶ Memorandum to the Parliamentary Committee on Broadcasting from the Canadian Association of Advertising Agencies, May 1936, 2. LAC RG 42, Vol. 1075, Parliamentary Committee on Radio, 1936.

through his skill his “impact on Canada ... lingers still.”⁹⁷ One of the major impacts was through the CBC and the way in which it addressed the language situation by creating a separate system to service Canada in French. In addition, further separation by region, with five new regional centres (BC, Prairies, Ontario, Quebec, Maritimes), helped keep language tensions to a minimum while still linking the country together.⁹⁸ Canadians were now part of a national network, but were also easily able to separate into regional networks to ensure local sensibilities would not be offended. Ironically, the CBC brought Canadians together by keeping them apart.

To do this the CBC did have to build transmitting stations across the country, finally completing the task in 1939 when CBK in Watrous, Saskatchewan went on the air. During the station’s inaugural broadcast on July 29, CBC Chairman Leonard Brockington told Canadians that with the completion of a high powered national network, Canada could now tell its story to the rest of the world.⁹⁹ Perhaps more importantly, the system allowed Canadians to tell their story to each other. This set up linked isolated communities with the rest of the country and allowed French minority communities in the West or English minority communities in Quebec to listen to programmes in their first language. The irony of the situation - that in order to create a national consciousness through radio, the CBC was forced to maintain a certain divide between Canada’s regions and languages – does not overshadow the immense benefits of finally linking the country together in a way that satisfied most regional and linguistic interests. While some may argue that the CBC’s policy actually distanced the two languages rather than create a more integrated

⁹⁷ J.L. Granatstein and H. Graham Rawlinson, *The Canadian 100: The 100 Most Influential Canadians of the 20th Century* (Toronto: Brown Canada, 1997), 26.

⁹⁸ Shea, 107.

⁹⁹ CBK Inaugural Broadcast, July 29, 1939, Saskatchewan Archives Board, Audio Recording R-5279.

national community, the fact that there can be national programming in both languages without the anger (and in certain cases hatred) of the CRBC era is an achievement that offers an optimistic view for the future co-existence of this country's founding languages.