Cultural diversity – Let's get moving

Michael McCabe is President and CEO of the Canadian Association of Broadcasters. He may be contacted by phone at (613) 233-4035, by fax at (613) 233-6961 or by e-mail at cab@cab-acr.ca

In a Maclean's column following the Summit of the Americas, Peter C. Newman wrote: "Culture means much more than the limiting concept of a country's literature, murals, films, folk songs and pottery. Bernard Ostry, the most intellectual of our bureaucrats, once defined the slippery word as 'central to everything we do. It's our environment and our adaptation to it. It's the way we know ourselves and each other. It's the image and abstractions that allow us to live together in communities and nations.'"

Our culture is the heart of our national character that includes perceptions of ourselves, how we want to be seen, and how others actually see us. It is our legacy. Our culture is who we are.

Should a nation's culture then become subject to commercial trade rules in the wake of new and converging technologies and market globalization, a commodity to be bought and sold on the world market like any other product or service?

The only possible answer to this question is "No".

In Canada we're making that "No" heard loud and clear by initiating international dialogue on the issue. It's happening with Canadian Heritage's International Network on Cultural Policy. Launched in 1998 by Minister Sheila Copps, the Network brings together culture ministers from around the world to discuss global cooperation and national commitment to the safeguarding of cultural heritage and diversity. The efforts of the Coalition for Cultural Diversity, a national alliance of Canadian professional cultural industry associations, is also helping to give momentum to the issue through its strong submissions to government on the treatment of the cultural sector and policies in trade negotiations, and through its international contacts.

In 1999, the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade set a major new initiative in motion with the release of a much-anticipated report from its Cultural Industries Sectoral Advisory Group on International Trade (SAGIT).

Canadian Culture in A Global World: New Strategies for Culture and Trade sounded the alarm on the impact of the integration of technologies, economics and our cultural industries, the growth of multinational conglomerates, and expanded free trading across more transparent borders. These could profoundly affect Canadian culture and our ability to negotiate trade agreements that respect our cultural diversity and products. The SAGIT proposed an international instrument on cultural diversity that would address this issue by doing the following:

- building consensus world-wide that this issue is important
- allowing for the inclusion of cultural diversity provisions in WTO and FTAA agreements
- ensuring countries can leverage this new environment without forfeiting their sovereignty and their cultural identity and policies.

More than two years later, the instrument remains a good concept. But we must get past general principles and put some meat on the bones of the idea.

The Minister for International Trade, Pierre Pettigrew, said recently that until we have an instrument or, at the very least, a process in place to develop the instrument, Canada will not commit in negotiations under the WTO General Agreement on Trade in Services in any area that undermines our cultural policy objectives. We must build this tool and give it substance so that we can attract other private and public sector cultural players from around the world and secure their buy-in. Or we must find other approaches to protect our cultural institutions.

To date, we have not engaged the Americans in the discussion on cultural diversity. What we call culture they call entertainment—and it's all business. The reality is there are many cultural-interest groups in the U.S. attuned to this issue. They understand the need to ensure cultural diversity, not uniformity, and they are integral to the movement. We must ensure they are brought into our deliberations.

This month, the CAB is hosting its second annual International Broadcaster Dialogue luncheon at the Banff Television Festival. The idea is to assemble broadcasters and producers and cultural decision-makers to move the dialogue beyond governments and engage industry people from all countries. It allows cultural industry stakeholders their say on the areas of cultural life and policies we need to protect, and to push the development of the cultural diversity instrument forward. Canada has taken an aggressive lead in steering this issue onto the international stage. Cultural industries in other countries need to put pressure on their governments to make it a priority. Our Banff event is aimed at just that. We'll have Pierre Pettigrew to lead the discussion.

If we sit on this issue we will erode the capacity of Canada and other nations to maintain and strengthen cultural policies and the infrastructures built to provide our domestic audience with a view of itself, and our international audiences with a sense of who we are. The issue is far more complex than this, but it's also that simple and the stakes are high. Let's get on it.