

# CBC TELEVISION NEWS HAS A BIAS PROBLEM

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**T**hough short of being universal, there is a reasonably widespread view in government, the universities, the press, and even in private radio and television that CBC Television News sets a Canadian standard for quality news production. An extensive Southam News/COMPAS national survey conducted in April, 2002 shows that the general public tends to share this sanguine view of the network's news performance (see [www.compas.ca](http://www.compas.ca)). Yet, alongside this respect for the quality of CBC Television News is pervasive evidence of ideological division over the service.

I want to argue that Left-Right division over CBC news is unhealthy for democracy, dangerous for the CBC, corrosive of Canadian national identity, and harmful to the political Left. But, first, consider some of the survey evidence that shows significant ideological conflict over CBC Television News:

- Self-described left-wingers are about twice as likely as self-described centrists to have watched CBC news the night before the survey interview, and half as likely to have watched CTV/Global.

- NDP voters were more than twice as likely to have watched CBC than Alliance voters and less than half as likely to have watched CTV/Global

- The overwhelming majority of NDP voters familiar with the CBC television show *Counterspin* consider it objective as compared to a minority of supporters of every other party. Seventy-five per cent of self-described left-wingers think it is objective, vs. only nine per cent among self-described right-wingers.

- Thirty-four per cent of all respondents agree that "The people

who run CBC Television News today have an unfair access to millions of taxpayer dollars so that they can promote their own personal political opinions and agendas"—57 per cent among Alliance voters vs. 25 per cent among New Democrats.

- Thirty-six per cent agree that "CBC Television's news bias today leads to its giving far too much attention to street demonstrations and to radicals hostile to international trade and globalization and not enough to objective experts"—52 per cent among Alliance voters vs. only 27 per cent among NDP supporters.

- Thirty-six per cent agree that Canada should "Gradually cut the subsidy and get CBC Television to seek voluntary donations from viewers and sponsors the way PBS does in the U.S."—57 per cent of Alliance voters vs. 25 per cent NDP voters.

- Sixty-six per cent of Alliance voters want the CBC Television subsidy reduced or abolished, compared to 20 per cent of New Democrats, while 3 per cent of Alliance voters want it increased compared to 27 per cent of New Democrats.

**O**ne does not need a survey to make the case that enthusiasts for CBC Television take comfort from the evident quality of the network's news programs. The Southam/COMPAS survey lends credence to this thesis. Perceived news quality was a recurrent, volunteered opinion when respondents were asked what they thought of the network.

When Canadians do perceive a national institution such as the CBC as providing quality, this is not only superb for the institution but it is also

potentially superb for the country. The country as a whole benefits because national pride and identity are greatly reinforced by perceptions that Canadian institutions deliver quality.

A generation ago, a research team undertook a massive survey for the then federal Department of Secretary of State on the cultural and non-cultural institutions and activities that engendered the most Canadian pride and loyalty to the country. At the top of the cultural list among English-speaking Canadians was the Royal Ontario Museum. Though provincial in mandate and provincial in funding, the ROM nonetheless engendered more pride in Canada than any other arts and culture institution because it was perceived as achieving the highest level of quality. By this logic, the perceived quality of CBC Television News can do much good for the country.

Yet, believing that CBC news quality is so good that evidence of bias can be safely ignored may be perilous. The evident ideological bias of the network's television news department risks eating away at the credibility of the network's news, undermining both the mother institution and popular good feeling about the country that the news department is intended to serve.

The Canadian Left and Right today agree on some of the biggest issues of governance—priority for health spending and personal income tax cuts. Yet they are divided, even sharply so, in their attitudes towards CBC Television News. The societal cohesion essential for Canadian democracy to flourish is undermined to the extent that the Right feels that it has reason to be mistrustful of CBC news. Healthy democracies need a climate of trust so that

when Left and Right exchange seats in Parliament the public policy consequences are not disruptive. By this logic, healthy democracies require cyclical changes of Parliamentary personnel as a guarantee against abuse of power, together with some degree of consensus on major public policy issues in order to assure an optimum level of economic and social stability. This phenomenon of Left-Right consensus and trust is at the root of the success of democracy as pioneered in the Anglo-American world.

A vital factor in the flourishing of democracy has been the Anglo-American and especially the American invention of journalism. As Jean Chalaby and other scholars of journalism have shown, throughout the 19th century American and British papers routinely printed more pages, carried more hard news, and reported more fact than their European counterparts. The British and American newspapers jointly invented the idea of the foreign correspondent and the news service; the American press invented the previously unheard-of ideas of the reporter and the interview.

The journalism of the successful, stable democracies of the Anglo-American world is never uniquely intelligent or well written. It is not superior in language or ideas. Anglo-American journalism is distinguished by being a little less partisan, more factual, less contrived to make a point, more pragmatic, less dogmatic.

The Anglo-American press almost never employed great writers. The most famous exception, Charles Dickens, resigned his job as editor after three weeks, describing his experience as an "error." By contrast, the continental tradition, especially the French tradition, was to employ great writers and poets, who saw their journalistic mission as one of advocacy and ideological interpretation rather than reporting.

Europeans were long resistant to the idea of the Anglo-American invention of an objective, news-oriented

journalism that sought to separate fact from opinion. An 1836 French definition of a reporter said that this was "the type of English journalist, a sort of clerk who regards it as his duty to take note of events' proceedings."

The Anglo-American model of objective journalism flourished in part because democracy took off in the English-speaking world, thereby allowing an independent, fact-oriented journalism to flourish, and also because this new journalism enhanced and reinforced these democratic developments. British journalists began to report on Parliament in the late 18th century, almost a century before France began to lift its strict, legal prohibitions against the unauthorized reporting of legislative debates. By the mid-19th century, the British press was throwing off the shackles of extensive government bribery. Successfully funded by ad revenue and no longer by covert government payments, the *Times* began to speak out on the special responsibility of the Fourth Estate to be independent of government. Across the channel, the French government carried on a mammoth program of media bribes until the First World War.

Until the outbreak of the Second World War, it is well documented, Parisian newspapers and the Havas news agency continued to accept sizeable bribes from various foreign governments on whose behalf they twisted the news. For decades after the war, French Presidents controlled the electronic media thanks to their ability to hire and fire newscasters on the government television network and to affect the content of the nominally private broadcasters operating from Luxembourg and Monaco that were owned by the nationalized banks.

The Canadian public is firmly ensconced in the Anglo-American tradition of democracy. We see pervasive evidence of this in the public's low tolerance for ethics violations in government, in its pervasive enthusiasm for democratic ideas and practices, and its discomfort with foreign policies that

entail relationships with despotic and abusive regimes.

The evidence from the survey research conducted by COMPAS for Southam News suggests that the CBC is not firmly entrenched in this same tradition. Rather than being a relatively unemotional, non-partisan conveyor of information on policy issues that arouse controversy, CBC news itself arouses controversy. It is perceived to behave at least partly in the continental tradition of a *journalisme engagé*, as evidenced by the data showing how it divides the public along ideological lines.

Left-right division over CBC television news is dangerous for the CBC because the ideological impact of CBC news puts the network outside the mainstream of Anglo-American journalism and society. CBC's conduct is dangerous because it risks jeopardizing the perceived quality of the news service, which is the last remaining pillar on which public financial support for the corporation rests. The public doesn't particularly value CBC entertainment programming, and few Canadians think national unity would be threatened if CBC Television were diminished.

Left-Right division over CBC news is unconstructive for Canada because such division puts the network's news service at risk. When the private networks are able to deliver higher quality news, the fate of CBC News might no longer matter. But until then...

Finally, and paradoxically, Left-Right division over CBC news harms the parliamentary Left. Ambitious young people, seeing the frustrations of the Left in parliamentary elections, may notice the special enthusiasm of the Left for CBC news and guess where their talents might be more welcome. The parliamentary Left is also harmed if it take its electoral cues from its friends in the news instead of from real voters.

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