

WITH Robert Fulford, Author and Arts and Literature Critic



Robert Fulford, whose *National Post* column appears on Tuesdays in the Arts & Life section and on Saturdays on the Op Ed page, has been a journalist since the summer of 1950, when he left high school to work as a sports writer on *The Globe and Mail*. He has since been a news reporter, literary critic, art critic, movie critic, and editor on a variety of magazines, ranging from *Canadian Homes and Gardens* to the *Canadian Forum*. He was the editor of *Saturday Night* for 19 years, 1968-1987, and has since been a freelance writer. His books include *This Was Expo*, *Best Seat in the House: Memoirs of a Lucky Man*, *Accidental City: The Transformation of Toronto*, and *The Triumph of Narrative*, the text of the Massey Lectures he delivered on CBC radio. He is an officer of the Order of Canada and a senior fellow of Massey College. He was interviewed at the Civitas Conference in Winnipeg on May 3, 2008.

Frontier Centre: You mentioned that Canada’s cultural community constantly feels threatened. Is Canada’s culture in fact threatened?

Robert Fulford: Well everybody’s culture is threatened in a way. The French can’t make popular records that anybody wants to listen to. Their film industry is okay at the moment but some years it seems to be vanishing. That’s the way the cultural world goes. It goes according to taste. It goes according to genius – you never can predict the appearance of a genius. So you can’t say our culture is a failure by any means, it’s a huge success in many ways. We have a tremendous number of performing artists in this country at the first class level that we never had before. We have new theatre companies cropping up and of course others dying. We have writers, that we never had 30 years ago. We’ve never had writers that were contending regularly around the world for translations, prizes and so on and now we have that as a *normal* part of our life. So there are many, many positive things about Canadian culture. My argument is that whenever we talk about it, we talk as if we’re so on the defensive or we’re defending ourselves and I think that comes out of our history of anti-Americanism and our fear that America will flood us with their material and we won’t have a chance to have our voices heard throughout the world. We have that fear and I think we began talking about that at least half a century ago and it’s never left us. I think we should relax about it. There’s no chance that we’re going to exclude American culture. There’s no chance that our culture is going to be more popular than theirs. It’s never going to happen for the Germans or the French or the Italians or the Japanese. In those countries, American stars are bigger than the local stars. It’s something you see all over the world, not in India but in many other countries. It’s not something we can manage through the government or boards or sponsoring and so on.

FC: The relationship between government and culture was an essential part of your discussion. What in your opinion is the correct relationship between the two?

RF: It is very hard to define it. I think things might have worked out a little better than they have, maybe a lot better. If the people in their government had been genuinely interested in this subject and not just been fobbing it off to a few bureaucrats and a few boards of directors of companies, things would have been different. I have practically never known a Canadian Cabinet Minister who is genuinely interested in this subject. That’s very bad luck we’ve had. We’ve never had people in this country who want to make this field work. That’s a bad break. I think that the Canadian artists at least, for example, the film

makers have been too pliant in their attitude to government. They’ve been so anxious to get money out of the government that they’ve put up with an incredibly complex, multi-leveled system of grants that turns every film producer in our country into a government lobbyist.

FC: In your discussion you mentioned that there should be some government support of arts and culture. What is that appropriate support?

RF: I’m not sure what it should be in any country. I don’t think we spend too much money on it in the government. I just don’t think that we spend it very well. I think we spent it in a very cliquish, narrow sort of way. But I don’t think that we need to spend a lot more. I certainly don’t think that we should spend a lot less. I think the government deals with this in a very in-intensive way. I don’t think the government has produced a class of people who can handle this really difficult subject, difficult and sensitive subject. I think that they treat it as if it’s just another bunch of bureaucratic problems that will be solved by moving a lot of paper around.

FC: You had criticized a number of bureaucrats, I think you had mentioned five, involved in grants. Is there a way to streamline this type of application and/or grant system? Is there a way to make that more efficient?

RF: Absolutely. I think that if the government is interested in doing it and rather than having more jobs for more bureaucrats, I think that if the government is interested in doing it they could probably do it with 1/8 of the people they have now. If the people they have are understanding of the issues in this field and of the proper approach to it.

FC: Canadian producers and film makers must follow the “Canadian consensus” to receive grants. What is this consensus? And can they avoid having to follow this consensus to get these grants?

RF: I think that every producer and director in this country has been turned down so many times that they feel defeated and I’m not sure how that can be fixed. What happens is that they actually try, I think that after a while they reach the point where they’re not conscious necessarily of doing it, but they’re trying to write grant proposals that will please the government. They are trying to develop the films that the government will be glad to produce or to help produce and I don’t think that’s a very good idea at all. It’s the way to make bad movies, really.

FC: What kinds of things do they think that the bureaucrats want to hear when they are giving their proposals?

RF: There is a liberal consensus in this country which is the reigning religion of most of the media and most of the public servants. It's sort of a gentle socialism or a left-liberalism or whatever. That is the way we think. For example, it freezes our minds on a hundred topics, for example healthcare we can't talk about healthcare without introducing or turning it into a horrible, powerful, moral issue of good guys/bad guys and so on. So that kind of issue can't be dealt with in film, it can't be dealt with on the CBC at any serious length and so it just lies there as a subject and film producers just step around it, delicately.

FC: Looking at the example of the *Idler* that you mentioned, is there a case for supporting pro-market, the kind of right-of-centre publications?

RF: There is definitely a case for supporting pro-market, right-of-centre publications. But in order for you to do that you would have to acknowledge that the pro-market view is legitimate and is a part of our country. We, at least in the intellectual sphere in this country, we don't like to think that. We don't like to think about reality. The reality is that this is a market-driven country. We, including the intellectuals and the bureaucrats and the professors and everybody else, we are extremely well off at this moment and by we I mean everybody who is working anywhere near a good salary is extremely well off. We are the richest generation of Canadians ever. And we believe somehow that markets and manufacturing and enterprise have nothing to do with this. I think we subconsciously believe that capitalism is there to be sheared. Its purpose is to be taxed. It doesn't need our help. It doesn't need our enthusiasm. It doesn't need our encouragement. And it certainly doesn't need approval and we're not going to give that approval because we don't really like it. That the collective view, I think, that we don't like capitalism although most of us live by it, I guess all of us live by it. Once in a while, here and there, I write pieces that argue about how you can't have freedom without capitalism or something like that and how capitalism makes our life possible. And I get letters from people who are astonished that anyone would hold such an old fashioned, crazy, conservative notion. They just don't want to look at the reality.

FC: Is there a way to create a more strictly market-based system for Canadian cultural support that would allow Canadian culture to survive?

RF: I think that if all the grants were taken away there would be far fewer artists in this country and in many sub-fields there would be far fewer chances for artists to learn their trade and to do their work so I wouldn't like that. However, if it happens there would still be an awful lot of art made in this country because throughout history artists have worked outside of government and patronage as much as they have worked inside of it.

FC: I guess in the multi-channel universe, what do you see as the role for the CBC?

RF: I wish I knew what the role is for the CBC. They certainly don't know. They have very little idea. If I could

tell you what it was, I could tell them and they'd be happy. I don't know what could be done with the CBC it's much, much too big and, but CBC believes it is much, much too small. The reality from outside says there's too much of it. A billion dollars or so seems like an awful lot of money to outsiders and when you think that there are very few programs that we are really attracted to. From the insiders where their budgets are always being cut, they feel like they don't have enough people to work on their programs, they don't have enough capacity in the budget to experiment and so on, that's how it looks like from the inside. So it's very hard to get those two outside and inside views working together. It's very hard to reconcile – the world looking at the CBC and seeing it as a huge, gigantic thing and the insiders thinking I can't produce this program. I do think that the people at the CBC are incredibly defeated. I know a lot of them and they have an incredible, defeated air about them. They don't like their corporation, they don't like their bosses and they don't like their mission which they don't understand.

FC: Is there a way for the Canadian cultural industry to avoid this kind of bureaucracy trap that you're speaking of that they've almost become lobbyists. Is there a way to avoid that?

RF: It seems that government can't do anything without doing too much of it. If they set up a bureau, they have to have another bureau to watch the first bureau. They have multiple layers of decision making and so on. It seems that government and the arts, just like the law and the arts, don't mix effectively and they blunder a lot when they do mix. On the other hand, I don't want it to go away. When you take it out and an awful lot of good people are going to lose their jobs or not begin their careers.

FC: You mentioned "anti-Americanism," a lot of the new productions that are coming out, I guess the CBC sees it I guess. To what extent is our culture still dominated by "anti-Americanism"?

RF: I think that a Canadian producer who is trying to deal with international struggles, international conspiracies or clandestine activity between different governments, a Canadian producer won't say Well I'm going to go after Saudi Arabia because the Americans are doing that. I'm not going to after Islam because the Americans or the British are doing that. So who am I going to after? I think they quickly look south and they say Hey the Americans are kind of evil. Everybody says they're evil now. Everybody says George Bush is evil and they're the Evil Empire now so we should go after them. This year we had, as I mentioned, four big productions made by or for the CBC where a couple of them were really brilliantly made, there's no question about that and a couple were very clumsy, but they all seem to say the same thing Those Americans you've got to watch them. They're a bunch of scoundrels! They'll come and steal your water.