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The Honourable Hedy Fry

Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage

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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.)): I'd like to call the meeting to order.

Before we go in camera to deal with the report and the recommendations, etc., Mr. Nantel would like to bring forward a motion. He does not need to give us 48 hours' notice because it is pertaining to the study at hand, so it is fine to bring it up now.

Mr. Nantel, go ahead, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Nantel (Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, NDP): Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I appreciate your flexibility.

I thought it was appropriate to present my motion publicly to all members of the committee.

I believe what the motion calls for is necessary, given the impact of the CRTC's decisions on local news and programming of national interest. The last CRTC decision might be favourable in terms of information, but it has a very negative impact on programming of national interest. Many organizations have complained: the Writers Guild of Canada, the Directors Guild of Canada, Unifor, ACTRA and the CMPA.

I would like therefore to submit this proposal to you, especially since Mr. Blais's term ends this summer. If we would like to invite him to appear to provide information, it is now or never. We could also talk about the decision pertaining to community radio that he made about ten days ago.

My motion is as follows:

That the Committee invite Jean-Pierre Blais, Chairman of the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, to appear before the Committee within 30 days to discuss the CRTC's decisions concerning local television and their consequences, and the conditions of renewal of licences taking effect on September 1, 2017 for television services of large English and French-language ownership groups.

You will receive the written motion momentarily.

If we have the time, I think we should do this now. These CRTC decisions have a direct impact on information, a positive one, we hope, as well as a negative impact on Canadian content, which is much discussed. Until now, OTA television, which is affected by this decision, has had to broadcast 9% to 10% of programming of national interest. This has now been reduced to 5%, and that has negative repercussions. All the groups mentioned the example of

Orphan Black. For these broadcasters, the demand could potentially be cut in half owing to this decision.

Similarly, I would like your opinion on another matter. I know that our time is not unlimited, but we could invite the large groups affected by this decision. I have prepared two further separate motions in this regard. You have the written motions. We could also invite producers, such as the CMPA. I can read them out, if you wish, but I think time is running short. In any case, you have these three separate motions in writing. They could be combined into a single motion.

We talk about CRTC decisions constantly. We considered this latest decision to be positive for local information, as regards the large groups, but it also has a less favourable impact on Canadian content, which we discuss here constantly. We do of course talk about news in our study, but Canadian content is one of our concerns.

I submit this to the committee. Thanks very much, everyone.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Pierre.

I only have your notice of motion on inviting the Canadian media producers: the Association québécoise de la production médiatique, the Alliance.... I don't have the CRTC one.

• (1540)

Mr. Pierre Nantel: I'll give it to you.

Mr. Seamus O'Regan (St. John's South—Mount Pearl, Lib.): We don't have the other one.

The Chair: We will send it to you.

Let us do the first one, which everyone seems to have. I will read it.

It says:

That the Committee invite Jean-Pierre Blais, Chairman of the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission to appear before the Committee within 30 days to discuss the CRTC's decisions concerning local television and their consequences, and the conditions of renewal of licences taking effect on September 1, 2017 for television services of large English and French-language ownership groups.

I want to point out before I open it up to discussion that there is a key phrase, which I want you to note. It says “within 30 days”. As you discuss the motion, let us discuss the feasibility of this. I also note that it's taking effect on September 1. There are, then, some timelines involved here. We all know, though, that our committee has already had a very clear sense, unanimously approved, of what work this committee would be doing.

Having said that, I'll turn to Seamus.

Mr. Seamus O'Regan: Madam Chair, I think we all found out about this news at the same time. We've cited the renewal of these English-language licences, and I assume they reduce for the French-language licences as well.

A voice: Yes.

Mr. Seamus O'Regan: We all know that these programs of national interest are the ones for which you really have to ask for BDUs. You have to demand that they do it. That's why these are there.

I do not know why the CRTC decided to reduce from 10% to 5%. It makes no sense to me, particularly when we look at the way our Canadian media industry is under siege. I have no idea.

Pierre, I would say my biggest concern about this motion is that all these developments, between this and the *National Post*—there is all sorts of speculation being talked about in the media about whether Postmedia could be bankrupt over the summer.... There is so much shifting sand. If we don't get this report done, if we allow every development to hold up the timeline on this report, we are never going to have it written. That's my only concern.

I would say I'm not in favour of “within 30 days”, because this timeline is too.... I would very much like—and I think we need, for the sake of our report—to understand the rationale for the CRTC's decision on this. I don't know that we need to occupy committee time with his appearing here. That's my only rationale. I would gladly invite him here, but we are down to a single-digit number of days.

The Chair: There are solutions to this conundrum.

Mr. Seamus O'Regan: Madam Chair, I leave it with you.

The Chair: There are timelines, Seamus.

Julie is next, then Darrell, and then Kevin.

Ms. Julie Dabrusin (Toronto—Danforth, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

My sense is that at this point we have to move on with this report. If we are having another witness, then we're incorporating more into this report and it becomes an ongoing thing. There will be changes and developments continually, as we go forward.

Mr. Nantel raised some good points about the Canadian content side of things also, but I very much believe that what we have been working on in this study is very much local news and information and access to it. That's a broader issue, a very important issue and important to my constituents, but I wouldn't want to conflate it with this study. It just hasn't been our subject matter.

My suggestion would be that we complete this report. We have the CRTC decision. We know what they have said. We can comment on how we feel, if we choose, but we have it. The report is out there. We don't need to call that evidence.

The Chair: Darrell.

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): I have indicated that I'm in agreement with this. It's fine.

There are just two comments I would make. One is to send them a letter and ask them why they did it. They can answer us within a week. We might get some information that would provide us a bit of insight.

The second one is that I would say we know the issue, which is that he dropped it from 10% to 5%. We are writing a report making recommendations. Are we able to make some recommendations saying you can't be doing that BS or what?

The Chair: There is a very clean way of going around the problem.

Kevin.

Mr. Kevin Waugh (Saskatoon—Grasswood, CPC): The term of the chairman of the CRTC is up at the end of June; his five-year term expires. There has been rampant speculation on where Mr. Blais goes or whether he stays, so it would be interesting. He makes the decision about where he is going to land on his feet in September. I think everybody has speculated. This person is in demand, and it will be interesting to see where he goes.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Seamus O'Regan: What have you heard?

Mr. Kevin Waugh: No, his term is up.

The Chair: Before I go back to Pierre—Pierre is going to round out the debate on this—is there anybody else?

I see no other hands.

Pierre.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Nantel: I completely understand how overwhelming and demanding the report is. We never seem to finish, and there is a good reason for that: it means we want to do our job well.

Mr. O'Regan referred to Postmedia's financial difficulties, and there are even rumours of looming bankruptcy. I make no secret of the fact that, at times, I have the sense that this is unrelated to our committee report.

There is some urgency here. In my opinion, we should all stop to consider this, since Mr. Blais will be leaving. Imagine the consequences of Postmedia going bankrupt. You touched on this and I will delve more deeply into it. The impact would be enormous. We might wonder why people are talking about this and why these rumours are circulating. Are we hoping for government intervention? I do not know. I do know, however, that we have met people during our study who have been able to find solutions, such as the people from *La Presse+*. If Postmedia could in some way borrow from the *La Presse+* model, we might have a solution to suggest to those people.

What I am having trouble with is people saying that we have to finish our report. You are right, Mr. O'Regan, I agree with you. I know that the last witnesses appeared a long time ago, in January. We have been fiddling with the report for three or four months now. We are all well-intentioned, but I think sometimes we have to stop doing what we had planned in order to address an emergency that has arisen.

For those who create Canadian content in our system, dropping the requirement from 9% or 10% to 5% is very dramatic. Moreover, this is clearly and directly related to the topic of our study. I think we all recognize how important this is. We have different views, however, on the possibility that an emergency warrants a break so we can invite witnesses.

• (1545)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Pierre. You have made some very cogent points.

I want to say that, as your chair, I would like to find an elegant solution to this. Of course, Peter Van Loan can always give us an elegant solution to everything, but I just want to say that, as you consider how you vote, given that Mr. Blais is leaving, it makes very little difference what he tells us and what we hear from him. He's gone. Secondly, we are and have been dealing with the section on CRTC. We have written a paragraph—

I'm sorry. Did you want to say something?

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Nantel: Because there is so much work.

[English]

The Chair: I'm not interceding. I'm not going to say what we're going to do, but we have been dealing with CRTC, so you know that. It's where we just finished our discussions.

Mr. Samson is suggesting that if we are concerned about the issue, we have some options as we look at our recommendations, with regard to things that we may discuss when we are in camera, but he put forth a solution here.

I would also like to say that rumours of the death of Postmedia are greatly exaggerated, but the point is that we have found in this study that as we move, every day the sands are shifting under us. We have to write this report, people. We have shifting sands. Otherwise we will be tabling this report in 2030 or something, if we continue to do this.

Pierre, I'd like to call the vote, and then when we go back in camera we can discuss ways of dealing with what you flagged for us, if necessary.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Nantel: Thank you for allowing me a final moment.

I would like to point out that this is not a personal fantasy. I am drawing the committee's attention to an urgent situation. Thousands of jobs are at stake. The fact is that it will be too late after the summer.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you. I'd like to call the question.

(Motion negated)

The Chair: I would like to go to the second motion, which obviously now is kind of moot. I'll read it to you:

That the Committee invite the Canadian Media Producers Association (CMPA), l'Association québécoise de la production médiatique (AQPM), l'Union des artistes (UdA), the Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists (ACTRA), and the Canadian Association of Community Television Users and Stations (CACTUS) to discuss the effects of the CRTC's recent decisions concerning local and community television, and the conditions of renewal of licences for television services of large ownership groups.

Before we get to that—we've just heard this on the first one—this is our second motion before us from Mr. Nantel.

Pierre, do you want to speak?

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Nantel: Ideally, we would have invited CRTC officials and representatives of the two groups affected by these decisions so we could ask them why these decisions were made and hear arguments from both sides.

Since we decided not to invite Jean-Pierre Blais, I cannot see how we could invite the others, even though it would be very relevant to hear their point of view.

I must point out nonetheless that the producers of national programming are all concerned.

• (1550)

[English]

The Chair: You're withdrawing this motion then, Pierre, are you? Have you said you're withdrawing it...?

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Nantel: If you ask me to withdraw it, I will. This motion was related to the previous one in a sense and we have agreed that we do not have the time to invite Mr. Blair, so I will drop it.

The next motion was to invite the three main groups affected by this decision. You can appreciate that the very first motion was followed by two related motions, one pertaining to the main groups and the other to producers and content creators. Since my first motion has been rejected, I can drop the two others as a result.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Pierre.

(Motion withdrawn)

The Chair: Since there is nothing further to discuss, I would like to move back in camera. I'll give us about a minute while we do that.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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