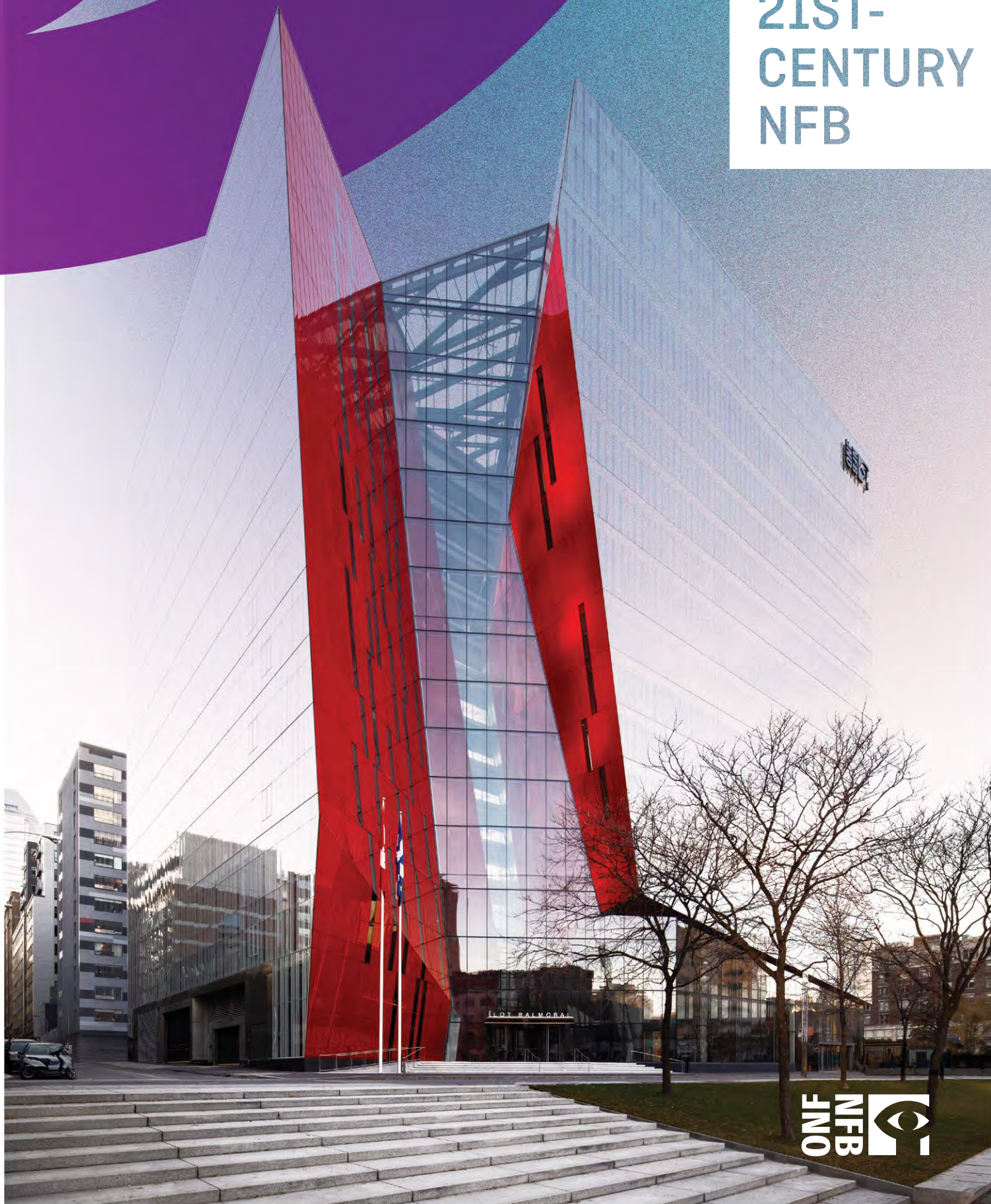
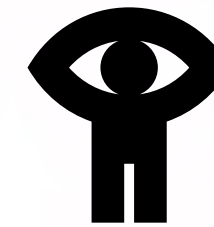


21ST- CENTURY NFB





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21st-Century NFB offers an insightful look at the challenges and visions that have animated NFB Commissioners during a time of great transformation, for the National Film Board of Canada and for the audiovisual sector as a whole.

Over the past two decades, digital technologies have changed the way audiovisual works are created, archived and shared. Audiences have come to expect new levels of engagement and participation. Creators have been eager to explore new forms of storytelling, and we've worked hard to be a place where that can happen.

Of course, the NFB has also had to navigate new budgetary realities—to be a trailblazer while doing more with less.

The history of the NFB in the 21st century is one where we've adapted to a new audiovisual landscape, as well as to greater expectations of transparency, responsibility and diversity for public organizations.

As the NFB prepares to welcome its next Commissioner, there are sure to be new challenges. I hope that *21st-Century NFB* can serve as a useful overview of NFB leadership during changing times, as together we work to keep the NFB relevant and engaged.

I want to thank all NFB employees, creators and artisans who have contributed to our achievements, during my term and those of my predecessors.

CLAUDE JOLI-COEUR



Government Film Commissioner
and Chairperson of the
National Film Board of Canada



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INTRODUCTION

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"You are a leader to provide
the space so that art
can happen."

JOAN PENNEFATHER
COMMISSIONER (1988-1994)

THE NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA'S PURPOSE IS, ONE MIGHT SAY, OPEN TO INTERPRETATION.

It's a government department, a cultural agency, a film producer, a distributor, the sum of the films it releases in a given year, a social catalyst, a repository of national memory, part of the government's cultural agency portfolio, a media body in global competition, a primary source of educational materials, a talent developer, an industry partner, and a technology innovator and creative lab. It has been all these things and more over the course of its almost 85-year history.

One could hardly say that the days leading up to WWII were simpler times. But the NFB's successful, unpredictable and complex future started with a seemingly mundane mandate when it was founded in 1939 on the eve of the war: "to make and distribute films designed to help Canadians in all parts of Canada to understand the ways of living and the problems of Canadians in other parts."

And, as the war dominated much of its initial output of films, the NFB served its mandate in a relatively straightforward fashion in those first years.

Strongly associated in the public's mind with those wartime efforts, the NFB struggled somewhat in the post-war years to—as its founder, John Grierson, put it—make peace as exciting as the tumultuous period that had just passed.

A revised mandate in 1950 helped to set it on a different course, one that would balance the need to make films "in the public interest" with the artistic take of new generations of filmmakers, whose films were to be "designed to interpret Canada to Canadians and to other nations."

How do you determine if such "interpretation" is being fulfilled by a government department? This isn't exactly as obvious as the mandate of a department or Crown corporation charged with responsibilities for, say, wheat, roads, or air traffic control.

Filmmakers, NFB staff and producers don't necessarily think about the mandate while fulfilling their duties, but the Chairperson/Government Film Commissioner of the day must.



The role—effectively the CEO of the organization—makes its occupant ultimately responsible for the NFB's creative output, but traditionally without a direct hand in determining what productions are made. They set the course, the ambition and the context for the “interpretation.”

Over the first quarter of the 21st century, three Commissioners—Jacques Bensimon (2001–2006), Tom Perlmutter (2007–2013) and Claude Joli-Coeur (2014–2022)—have each advanced the NFB's mission, responding to technological and social change, and seeking to guide its evolution through some of its most turbulent years. They were preceded by two female Commissioners, Joan Pennefather and Sandra Macdonald, who broke new ground in their leadership.

Joan Pennefather, NFB Commissioner from 1988–94, described the Commissioner's role this way: “Artists are at work. You are a leader to provide the space so that art can happen.”



A creation of the 20th century, the organization was, for some, outmoded, weakened and well past a purposeful existence by century's end. Only a decade before, when the NFB accepted an Honorary Oscar in 1989 on its 50th anniversary, it marked a moment in its history that while it celebrated its past, while still intact in terms of its traditional technology of film, its in-house filmmaking teams and large technical resources, it was about to face the most challenging decades in its history.

As Jacques Bensimon's predecessor, Sandra Macdonald, put it in the NFB's 1996–97 Annual Report: “The financial constraints we absorbed brought with them a dramatic transformation in not only the NFB's internal operations... but also in the long-established culture of the agency.” Government-wide reductions meant that the NFB's parliamentary allocation was cut by 32 percent—dropping from \$82 million in 1994–95 to approximately \$55 million by the end of the decade.



Reduced finances, and the changes they wrought, weren't the only challenges. As Macdonald wrote, the NFB at this time “was also undergoing an intense period of scrutiny, re-evaluation and subsequent re-engineering.”

Very public scrutiny came the same year as the cuts, as the NFB faced a re-evaluation of its mandate (as did the CBC and Telefilm Canada) from a government-appointed Mandate Review Committee. The committee's report, entitled “Making Your Voices Heard: Canadian Broadcasting and Film for the 21st Century,” re-affirmed the National Film Board's role as a public producer, but suggested that the NFB's activities be “streamlined in order to focus on production,” with a much greater emphasis on television as the NFB's way of reaching audiences.

Outside the committee, some film industry and media figures questioned whether “concerns about its long-term survival” were yet settled, while one report suggested to the government that \$5 million from the NFB's budget be diverted to a new feature film fund.

As one journalist wrote: “A few years ago, the Canadian Film and Television Production Association—and a legion of other angry creative souls in this country—were after NFB blood. Fed up with what they saw as a broken and bloated federally funded arts institution, independent filmmakers wanted the 65-year-old National Film Board dismantled. In the late nineties, the rallying cry to do away with the NFB—once a mighty icon that produced the best this country had to offer in documentary and animation—was loud and unrelenting. The board's budget had been cut by one-third and staff numbers slashed.”

The NFB, under Macdonald, responded with “A New Charter for a New Century” in 1996, asserting, among other changes, significant reductions in the number of staff filmmaker and craft positions, which, for many, cut too deeply into the NFB's traditional artist-artisan context for creativity. The plan also set the NFB on course to collaborate more with the television milieu: “To wit, at least six productions in each of English and French will be aimed at prime-time television exposure on a national network

each year, and the audience targets will be one million in English and 500,000 in French for these productions. Achieving such exposure implies a choice of subjects which should be of interest to large numbers of Canadians, and a relationship of co-operation with major broadcasters.”

As the NFB grappled with the cuts, it also embarked on changes to how it made films—and with whom—and how it distributed them, with the Internet starting to emerge as not merely a place for promotion, but as something more central to the NFB's mandate of creation and dissemination. The framework for what was to come was being put in place as the 20th century came to a close.

Its budget slashed, and its way of reaching viewers radically altered, its position in the Canadian film scene started to shift dramatically with the rise of the independent production sector, and the make-up of its creative force engaged with a more diverse Canada. Even what constituted an NFB “film” went through radical re-consideration.



JACQUES BENSIMON

(2001-2006)

"FILMMAKERS ARE THE ANTENNAE
OF OUR CULTURE"

Upon his appointment as Government Film Commissioner in June 2001, Jacques Bensimon faced what probably every predecessor (other than Grierson) faced: a disconnect between how the NFB was perceived and what it actually was. Take this *Globe and Mail* statement:

“If you were an edgy young filmmaker ready to make your cinematic mark on the world, would you seriously consider a career with the National Film Board of Canada? Ah, the good old NFB. Most members of Generation X, Y and maybe Z will recall their introduction to the venerable Crown corporation in a darkened classroom, the 16-mm film loudly flapping off a metal projection wheel. When the film finally rolled and a tiny wood carving began its epic journey in *Paddle to the Sea*, an entire room of eyeballs immediately glazed over.”

Bensimon was very cognizant of that older NFB, having been a filmmaker there, hired out of film school in 1967. He held a reverence for the creative engine that the NFB he knew had been, but he wasn't held back or misguided by nostalgia for it. The world had changed, the media landscape had changed, and the NFB's situation had changed. “For my generation and the preceding ones, the NFB was a gift from heaven. Gilles Groulx, Michel Brault, Claude Jutra, Colin Low, Wolf Koenig, Tom Daly—to mention only a few—were my teachers.”

—
**"FOR MY GENERATION
AND THE PRECEDING
ONES, THE NFB WAS A
GIFT FROM HEAVEN."**
—

Bensimon inherited an NFB still struggling with the massive budget cuts of 1996.

Upon his arrival, Bensimon wrote to staff: “I am back with you after a space of 15 years because the NFB has always been close to my heart. I thought it was part of my past. But it will obviously be part of my future too—and yours.” He challenged them

to consider fundamental questions with him: “What is the relevance of the NFB? Why does it exist in today's cultural landscape?”

He had been at the NFB for 18 years, as a filmmaker, then as director of the programming committee for French Program and director of the International Program. In 1986, he left the NFB to help create TFO, Ontario's French-language public broadcaster, and then took on a senior role at the Banff Television Festival.

Although he drove the NFB to seek fruitful engagement with broadcasters (often railing against the fact that another federal government entity, the CBC, rarely showed NFB films), he was both a champion of big-screen cinematic expression and an early advocate for the potential of the Internet. Years before YouTube, and decades before streaming services like Netflix, he urged NFB colleagues to reflect on the question, “Will we be able to rise to the challenge of using this medium for creation? To do with the Internet what creators did in the 1960s with *cinéma vérité*: invent a new form of expression, a new way of communicating.”

It was an example of his provocative style as a manager. He told staff that he wanted “the NFB to be open to new ideas, to push the form and advance social debate. The NFB has to be an incubator of new talents, open to the outside world. The status quo is not an option! Because in my view it simply would foreshadow our own ominous death.”

But he sought to alter the context within which creative decisions could more easily and effectively made. “It is not in any way my intention to dictate the programming choices from on high.”

His priorities—aside from the one that every Commissioner wrestled with: a shortage of funds—included the cultivation of emerging talent, to expand the diversity of voices, to reaffirm the social value of the NFB's productions, to underscore its critical role in education, to draw from the well of the NFB's collection in order to spark new works and new ideas, and to re-impress upon the country, and the film industry, the vital role the NFB played.



He saw no contradiction between his passion to re-energize the NFB's artistic and social-change imperatives while embracing every possible commercial outlet to make sure the films were seen, here and abroad. He noted, too, that part of the challenge was that “[w]hile hundreds of our films are broadcast every month, few people know they are watching an NFB film.”

He saw the NFB's partnership with Corus Entertainment and the CBC on the new Documentary Channel as one of the key tools to achieving this—with Bensimon even hosting a weekly program called *NFB Classics*. “We are also emphasizing the potential of partnerships to catapult us forward. Most visible is the new digital TV service the Documentary Channel, launched last September. As a partner with CBC and Corus, we contribute programming to two regularly scheduled, branded strands of NFB productions. The NFB intends to seek additional channel partners, in particular a French documentary service.”

He also felt that the NFB had faded somewhat from its visibility in communities across Canada, and so encouraged an expansion of the NFB's storefront Mediatheque in downtown Toronto and Montreal's CineRobotheque, with state-of-the-art on-demand video viewing stations.

But perhaps the most far-sighted initiative used early Internet distribution to reach people across the country. The CineRoute broadband service delivered thousands of screenings of broadcast-quality NFB productions to students and staff at Canadian universities and research centres. Bensimon saw it as the first step in something more ambitious: “We're now working on bringing this broadband service to the World Wide Web, thereby positioning the NFB as a full-fledged webcaster.”

His work with private sector broadcasters and producers empowered him to be a fierce advocate for the NFB's editorial leadership, deflecting suggestions from some, as the *Globe and Mail* reported, that the NFB simply become “the Telefilm of documentaries and animation—by relinquishing complete editorial and creative control to directors.” His response? The NFB is not simply a “milk cow. We're not there to be the fifth part of the wheel, in terms of completing the financing. We're there to initiate, to work with filmmakers who want to go further in that kind of snowplough effect into the world of the unknown. The expression, in filmmaking, that others haven't been able to do.”

Bensimon set much of the course the NFB was to follow in subsequent years in terms of expanding the diversity of voices, most especially those of young filmmakers, and communities less represented on and behind the screen, with programs like Reel Diversity, Hothouse and Picture This, drawing new talent to the Board to make short films under the guidance of experienced NFB teams. Wapikoni Mobile trained young Indigenous people in video production, bringing new voices to the fore, while Parole citoyenne and CITIZENshift were participatory web platforms sharing perspectives on social change through photography, blogs and podcasts.

It was somewhat personal for Bensimon. “As a minority filmmaker who came to the NFB in the late 1960s, I can attest to the great progress that we have made in these areas. But on the downside, only 7.1 percent of our workforce were members of visible minorities, with just 1.4 percent Aboriginal. Clearly, there is room for much improvement. Fully reflecting Canada’s diversity isn’t just the right thing to do—it also offers us a unique selling proposition. As Canada’s public film producer, we have a chance to showcase our diversity to the world. Let’s not allow our typical Canadian modesty to blind us to what an enormously valuable asset this is.”

Seemingly, like most Commissioners before him and since, Bensimon fought to put the NFB on more stable financial footing despite its shrinking budget allocation (unlike other arms of government, the NFB’s funding wasn’t increased to keep up with inflation). In 2005, he argued his case to the government in this way:

“Canada needs a strong NFB. The budget cuts of the ‘90s have left the NFB seriously and critically underfunded at a time when its public interest voice and platform are more essential than ever to nurturing social cohesion and mutual understanding. The juncture of world events and its attendant need for a new form of civic engagement, the explosion in new technologies, the fact that media-making and awareness have become as essential as reading and writing, have made the public producer role as relevant, if not more, than when it was first created. The need for public interest media that can provide a platform for complex discussions and interpretations of societal change is especially pronounced to countries such as Canada where significant transformation is underway.”

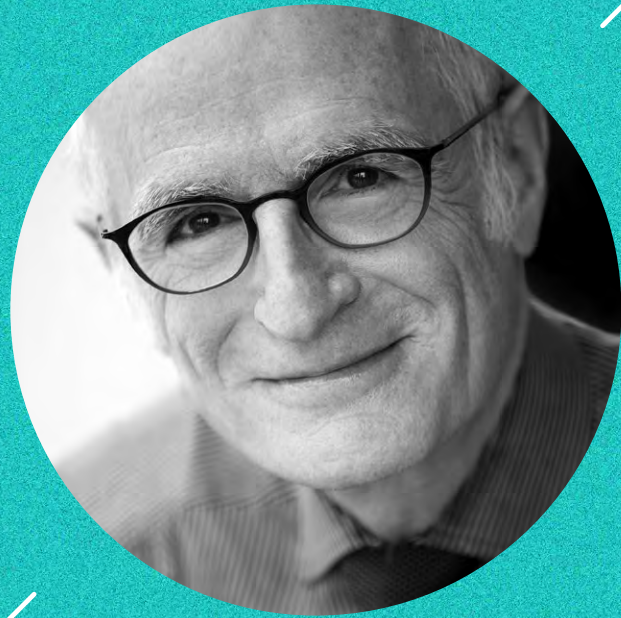


The increase and sustainable budgets he sought didn’t come in his term, but it didn’t prevent Bensimon from making the NFB’s case on many fronts, as it re-asserted its leadership in new platforms, such as e-cinema and the nascent world of web documentaries, along with such industry forums as the NFB-led Doc Summit at Toronto’s Hot Docs, and major international co-production partnerships.

As his term at the helm wound down, Bensimon reflected on what he described as Canada’s “very fragile audiovisual ecosystem.” It was one he proudly helped nurture, always considering the big picture, while attending to the details of the creative ecology that helped talented people inside and outside the NFB flourish.

Upon his passing in 2012, he was said to have left “an indelible mark” on the NFB. In a tribute Bensimon wrote about Grant McLean, Acting Commissioner of the NFB during two successful if tumultuous years in the late 1960s, we hear echoes of the burning passion Bensimon had for the institution: “I had a sense of that profound attachment I find in the many men and women who have served with the Film Board. They all have a vision of... what it should be, what it could be... in some fundamental way they are all forever marked by the experience.”





**TOM
PERLMUTTER**

(2007-2013)

"INVENTIVENESS OF HAND
AND PASSION OF HEART"

In its first decades, the NFB operated in a context without many other players—even the CBC didn't start broadcasting on television until 13 years after the founding of the NFB—and in a media environment without a large private sector.

But commercial opportunities, technological change and public funding all evolved in the 1960s and beyond to help create a vibrant field of independent production companies, one which sometimes looked askance at the NFB, as a competitor and even as a redundant organization.

Its unique position—other public producers around the world faded away or evolved into funding bodies—also meant its leadership had to manage, nurture and sometimes grapple with a unique corporate culture. It had to juggle a blend of documentary and animation sensibilities, opportunities of the commercial marketplace, a focus on education, and the strictures occasionally presented by the rules that a government agency—one that sometimes makes Academy Award-winning films—had to operate under.

Jacques Bensimon brought both his early experiences inside the NFB and his years in broadcasting to the job, and his successor, Tom Perlmutter, appointed in June 2007, drew from his five-plus years as head of the NFB's English Program Branch, working closely with Bensimon to renew the organization.

In welcoming Perlmutter to the NFB, Bensimon spoke of him as someone “who will considerably enrich the general culture of the institution, and who is recognized in the industry for his vast experience.” Perlmutter's experience producing major series for Canadian networks such as the Discovery Channel, History TV, CBC and CTV, and for foreign broadcasters such as Canal+ and Channel 4, was to inform his time at the helm of the NFB, as he brought a private sector perspective to a public institution. But he also brought with him a deep affection for the nation's storyteller.

Perlmutter spoke of the sometimes dissonant perceptions of the NFB, according to some who saw the institution as an honoured but somewhat faded figure: “For many Canadians the NFB brings back memories of school and films that are ‘good for you.’

“I must confess I had something of that attitude myself when I first came to the NFB seven years ago as the director of English Programming. I had made the move from the private to the public sector. Unlike many of my generation I did not start or make my career within either the CBC or the NFB. I had always made my way independently. Even though I had worked in collaboration with the NFB on a number of projects and felt its mythical power, it also often struck me as opaque.

“What I discovered very quickly in coming to the Film Board was the NFB was a jewel—that within its rambling industrial-like headquarters on Côte-de-Liesse in Montreal lay an unparalleled quickness of mind, inventiveness of hand and passion of heart. The trouble was that it was a secret. In fact, one of the best-kept secrets in Canada. Curiously enough, when I travelled outside of Canada the accolades were phenomenal: the NFB was greeted with a kind of awe reserved for royalty.”

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Among his first tasks—again, familiar to previous Commissioners—was, as the *Globe and Mail* put it, taking on “the Sisyphean task of explaining time and time again what exactly the NFB does.”

Part of that task was defending the nuances of NFB programming. When it succeeded with a film that broke new creative ground and captured global praise, instead of capitalizing on it and making a sequel, NFB management would urge its producers to reach for even newer innovations.

As Bensimon had said, in setting the stage for his successor, such an emphasis places the NFB “in a constantly fragile situation. Why? Because you're constantly breaking new ground and therefore taking the risk.”

The new Commissioner's view was that the NFB was very well poised, due its flexible mandate, creative history and position as a keeper of so much of Canada's audiovisual heritage, “to leapfrog into the future,” one in which the Internet is central to public life and social change.

Connectivity in every sense. As he stated it: “How do we create a place where we connect with others? How do we create communities despite wherever we come from, despite whatever baggage?” Yet again, the NFB's interpretative mandate was responding to a changing media environment, and to a changing country. “What is interesting is how do you create this postmodern nation anchored in common democratic values no matter what your personal religion or culture? Through cultural means you can explore things that may be difficult through other means.”



But the NFB's history of taking its films directly to the public—in the early years, even by truck with a projector on-board, if that's what it took to reach them—wasn't something to be consigned to the archives but, rather, to be re-invented. Its legacy of engagement was something Perlmutter looked to for inspiration, both for its production and distribution mandates.

This included re-interpretations of its Challenge for Change program, a hugely influential slate of social-change films made with and for communities, ones often left out of the national conversation. Filmmaker-in-Residence, for example, embedded a documentarian inside an inner-city hospital in Toronto to collaborate on some of the world's pioneering multi-platform storytelling projects.

All of these, and others, demonstrated the NFB's confidence in embracing new technology for new purposes, transforming what the "documentary" could be. For Perlmutter it was most appropriate for a national "brand" that had among the country's most "positive national and international attributes" and that spoke of "integrity, social engagement, commitment to diversity, artistic innovation, and authenticity."

And while these efforts underlined the NFB's role in taking risks the private sector cannot, "it does not mean bypassing the private sector. Often central to these activities will be partnerships with the private sector. It is just that the critical addition or leadership of the NFB will make possible what would have been either impossible or difficult to achieve. The long-term health of the private sector, where wealth generation, at the end of the day, rests on something so ephemeral as creativity, depends on, demands a multi-dimensional, risk-taking public arena. The NFB provides what neither our private nor our public broadcasters can."

During Perlmutter's term, the television landscape continued to morph, expand and sometimes discard a sense of public purpose, with documentaries shifting off prime-time and even falling from key spots on specialty channels.

For Perlmutter, the Internet was both a threat to mainstream television models and a huge opportunity for creation, with a public body like the NFB well-positioned to experiment in the new online realm. He presciently warned of the likely domination of the web by large commercial interests who would be "quick to figure out ways to appropriate the sites that emerge and become hits. Whoever controls the context, at the end of the day controls the message."

So, it was time to jump in, and when others saw the web as a place to promote films, the NFB saw it as a place for authentic, socially engaged public dialogue through innovative creative media making. This came to include some of the first original productions for mobile phones in Canada, and, with the Canadian Film Centre Media Lab, *Late Fragment*, North America's first-ever interactive feature film. Said Perlmutter: "We need to explore the language, the grammar, the aesthetics" of these new digital story tools. "It is so rare to be at the birth of a completely new art form. It's like being in 1900 at the birth of cinema. People will say it happened in Canada, it happened at the NFB."

—
"IT IS SO RARE TO BE AT THE BIRTH OF A COMPLETELY NEW ART FORM. IT'S LIKE BEING IN 1900 AT THE BIRTH OF CINEMA. PEOPLE WILL SAY IT HAPPENED IN CANADA, IT HAPPENED AT THE NFB."
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This was underlined by his initiative to create two digital creation studios—one in French Program in Montreal, the other in English Program in Vancouver—which quickly garnered global acclaim for their innovative use of new technologies in the service of storytelling. Their acclaimed productions opened the way to a new form of expression that has now diversified, intensified and become part of the media landscape.

Perhaps the most far-reaching digital shift was the launch in January 2009 of the NFB's online Screening Room at nfb.ca, rooted in the massive task of digitizing thousands of films. Perlmutter undertook this at a time when this kind of platform barely existed (Netflix, for example, had only started streaming films in 2007), and imbued NFB staff with the understanding that an online presence was about far more than an updated website.

Perlmutter: "The NFB is the caretaker of an enormously valuable and important Canadian audiovisual heritage: 13,000 films, 500,000 still images and an extensive sound library. Until now they have been a resource for historians and film buffs. We've looked after the collection well, but for the most part they remained lost from view. Imagine releasing the latent energy of those incredible works by putting them in the hands of Canadians. Imagine what can happen when you allow that treasure hoard into the world to seed new thoughts, provoke new reflections, inspire new work, and create new economic opportunities."

This mission then saw NFB staff continue their tradition of technological innovation, creating an ecology of processes and tools for digitization, conservation, restoration, cataloguing and accessibility. (It was key for Perlmutter that Canadians had free access to the films they had already paid for.)

These initiatives, while true to the NFB's history of experimentation with technology, took some by surprise, including *Fast Company* magazine, which mused on the question of "how Canada's NFB became one of the world's hippest digital content hubs." Perlmutter explained it to them this way: "This digital shift is in continuity with tradition," he said. "You've got to look at tradition in terms of its real meaning as opposed to just wrapping yourself in the past."

"THIS DIGITAL SHIFT IS IN CONTINUITY WITH TRADITION. YOU'VE GOT TO LOOK AT TRADITION IN TERMS OF ITS REAL MEANING AS OPPOSED TO JUST WRAPPING YOURSELF IN THE PAST."

As the work on screens from mobile to laptop continued apace, Perlmutter also underlined the importance of works intended for the big screen. The feature documentary, often perceived as too long and challenging for commercial television, remained difficult to fund and, in the hands of talented filmmakers, unlikely to fit prime-time's expectations for predictable narratives and cinematic styles. He joined forces with the Canadian Film Centre to create a program for experienced directors to develop long-form films, drawing such talent as Sarah Polley, for whom the program led to her highly acclaimed feature *Stories We Tell*, which itself upturned conventions of documentary storytelling.

On his departure from the NFB, Perlmutter spoke to *Playback* about what he saw as a significant challenge still facing the institution: "As cultural agencies we have a lot more work to make sure there's a much broader palate of people who come in. Not simply being patriarchal and saying, 'We need to hear your voice.' It's about ensuring that the decision makers are the ones coming out of that incredibly vital dynamic creative community."

In a 2012 study commissioned by the NFB on the effectiveness of the nfb.ca Screening Room, analysts at PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) concluded the ongoing addition of films to the online offerings there "far exceeded the original objectives... the results have exceeded expectations in almost all categories: the number of views both in Canada and internationally, the length of time viewers have been prepared to watch content online... and made available across such new devices such as mobile in a very short timeframe." This at a time when the now-seemingly ubiquitous streaming service Netflix was still offering direct DVD distribution to consumers.

The technological transformations that allowed for the creation of the Screening Room also, perhaps inevitably, sparked the demise of the need for physical media as a way of reaching audiences. That—and a 10-percent cut to the NFB's budget in 2012—led to the closing of its Toronto and Montreal mediatheques and cinemas.



**CLAUDE
JOLI-COEUR**

(2014-2022)

"AN URGENT NEED TO TELL OUR STORIES
AND ALL THE STORIES"

More than a decade into the new century, the NFB had undergone substantial and successive reductions in its funding, structure and use of technology, re-shaping its programming to encompass new media works—often pioneered by the NFB itself—and embracing new digital routes to reach audiences.

With two stints as Acting Commissioner and years as the NFB's Assistant Commissioner, head of Government Relations and Strategic Planning and Business and Legal Affairs, Claude Joli-Coeur brought, upon his appointment as Commissioner in December 2014, a breadth of experience as an entertainment lawyer in the private sector, with various leadership positions at Astral Entertainment, Motion and TVA International, and other major Canadian television industry companies.

Early in his tenure, he defined the key issues facing the NFB as encompassing “the coexistence of traditional and digital media, the proliferation of platforms, and the dramatic erosion of revenue generated by traditional media and their migration to digital.” (And, yet again, doing so in the context of a government budget freeze; in 2014, that meant absorbing a shortfall of \$4 million.)

But even with—or because of—these huge shifts, the NFB had evolved and was already swimming in the digital waters, comfortable “inventing new forms of narrative and exploring genres that evolve and overlap.” With more than 60 million online views at nfb.ca and partner platforms, the NFB was connecting with audiences for whom the digital was the preferred space, and so one in which they were open to what was new.

The myriad changes and challenges since the start of the millennium also presented an imperative to re-set the NFB's relationships with its creative collaborators. Who gets to make the films that are at the centre of the NFB's mandate to interpret Canada?



Long before other institutions and agencies examined their commitments—or lack thereof—to equity of access and funding for filmmakers, the NFB took a leadership role with such revolutionary initiatives as the creation of Studio D in 1974, the world's first feminist production unit, and the ongoing development of Indigenous and culturally diverse talent.

But such programs can ebb and flow with the availability of funding (an ever-present part of the NFB's operational realities) and be seen as token efforts, well-meaning but not profoundly affecting the NFB's core output.

For Joli-Coeur, in his new role, it would take major institutional changes, in the midst of sweeping social and digital transitions in the world at large, to transform the NFB into the organization it needed to be in a Canada far different than the one the NFB had served for decades.

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"PERSONALLY, I FIND THE LACK OF REPRESENTATION UNACCEPTABLE, GIVEN THE AMAZING TALENT THAT EXISTS. AT THE NFB, WE ARE PRETTY CLOSE TO PARITY, BUT IT'S NOT ENOUGH."

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Without sincere actions to ensure the equitable representation of women, Indigenous, BIPOC and LGBTQ2+ creative communities in the NFB's production slate, its management and its overall staffing, the organization could no longer be said to be truly serving its mandate.

Addressing these creators' access to and leadership potential for the NFB would become a pillar of Joli-Coeur's time as Commissioner.

In a signature move that influenced many in the media industry and beyond, he announced early in his tenure a sweeping parity initiative for women filmmakers and craftspeople, a commitment that was also meant "to inspire others and be part of a collective movement."

"The fact remains that, we're still, as an industry, having this conversation about women being fully represented, on screen, off screen and in key industry positions. Personally, I find the lack of representation unacceptable, given the amazing talent that exists. At the NFB, we are pretty close to parity, but it's not enough. But we are going to take this one step further. By 2019, gender equity in spending on NFB productions will no longer be an issue. It will simply be."

He also identified the huge discrepancy of "a real drop off—between women filmmakers and those in other key creative positions such as screenwriting, cinematography, editing and film music composing," with, for example, only 12 percent of cinematographers being female. An imbalance he wanted to see rectified.

By International Women's Day in 2022, the NFB was able to announce that "60 percent of all ongoing projects at the NFB were directed by women or by teams with equal or greater representation of women than men. Notably, 66 percent of production spending was also allocated to productions led by women. The NFB met or surpassed goals for gender parity in three of four key creative functions: screenwriting (58 percent), editing (50 percent) and music composition (57 percent). In addition, 42 percent of productions were shot by women cinematographers, a significant increase over previous years, when the figure had been below 20 percent."

Historical injustices for creators in Canada extend across the spectrum, and the NFB has taken on the task of redressing the situation.

Canada's first storytellers continue to astonish audiences across every form of media, but Indigenous stories, while often the subjects of NFB films over the years, were not often told by Indigenous creators. Any ongoing efforts to address inequities in access to production and representation behind and in front of the camera also, of course, had to include them.

In 2017, Joli-Coeur announced an action plan to begin to do just that. "Building on these important creative histories and guided by the recommendations of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the plan included a commitment to have Indigenous-led production represent a minimum of 15 percent of the NFB's total production spending." Indeed, by 2019–20, this was achieved, and of the 75 productions completed that year, 19 percent were directed by Indigenous filmmakers, accounting for 15 percent of that year's total spending.

In introducing the plan, Joli-Coeur acknowledged the NFB's "enormous debt to the first generation of Indigenous filmmakers at the NFB, first and foremost Alanis Obomsawin. Alanis joined the NFB in 1967 and fought against an often-hostile environment to create an unparalleled body of work that has fundamentally recast understandings of Indigenous realities and relationships with settler society."

The correction of the past imbalances meshes with the NFB's overall mandate. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission presented harrowing documentation and testimonials of the impacts of Canada's Indigenous policies and Indian Residential Schools, and underlined the work organizations like the NFB could do, stating in its report that "[c]reative expression can play a vital role in this national reconciliation, providing alternative voices, vehicles, and venues for expressing historical truths and present hopes."

It also highlighted the key role of public memory institutions like the NFB in the shaping and sharing of national collective memory, in reframing our "understanding of who we are and what has come before."

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**“WHO WE ARE”
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“Who we are” and diversity of expression are foundational expressions of the mandate of the NFB. In a comprehensive diversity, equity and inclusion plan put forward by Joli-Coeur in 2021, the NFB underlined its belief that creativity thrives in an environment that promotes and secures opportunities for those who are underrepresented. Along with the established plans to support women and Indigenous filmmakers, this initiative drives for a much broader diversity of expression, to include official-language minority communities, Black and racialized communities, LGBTQ2+ communities and people with disabilities.

Among the organization's objectives are eliminating systemic racism and unconscious bias in hiring and programming, prioritizing diversity, equity and inclusion in all aspects of the NFB's operations, and ensuring lasting change.

Joli-Coeur: “The NFB has also led by embracing new voices and visions from across genders and ethnicities, by being an employer sincerely inclusive of people with varied abilities and backgrounds, and by dedicating itself to being an organization that works to celebrate and advance Indigenous perspectives. This isn't merely policy, but a pulse, one that informs and energizes the entire mandate of the NFB. The diverse talents needed to foster our

14,000 productions over the course of its history have not been secondary to the NFB's filmmaking formula—they are the formula.”

The arrival of the global pandemic in 2020 drove the NFB, like all organizations, to reconsider some of its most fundamental ways of doing things. The innovation that it regularly applies to its productions was now called upon to invent new ways of collaborating from a distance. This actually served to focus its attention on the very act of collaboration, accelerated by the NFB's expertise in adapting new technologies to new purposes.

And, in fulfilling its distribution mandate, as Joli-Coeur put it, “thanks to the digital shift that the NFB began several years ago, we were able to respond to this situation nimbly and proactively. Our public screenings have gone virtual, our post-screening conversations with filmmakers have continued online.” The extraordinary circumstances increased nfb.ca viewership from 7,000 daily to 25,000, and the NFB Education team curated films and support materials to help bolster the challenging environment of online learning for 4 million young Canadians during the many months of the pandemic.

Although NFB films were long a part of classroom enrichment for generations of students, the new approach from the NFB Education online platform is one that “places the student at the centre of the process and provides tools to teachers using inquiry-based learning and the development of critical thinking, and global citizenship.”



Much of this technological spark across the organization's departments had been advanced by the NFB's long-planned move from its 1950s suburban Montreal headquarters to a new purpose-built facility downtown. Not merely a local space for its staff, the building—a new home for 400 employees, creative crews, experts, creators, technical services and R&D in the heart of Montreal's Quartier des Spectacles—also serves as the hub for digital connections with its teams across the country.

“This is a historical move for us, one which will take us into the future and allow us to be part of a vibrant arts community,” said Joli-Coeur. “But we'll be bringing some of those great souls from the past who created here with us. We want to recreate the space so all those great memories can remain with us.”

“Filmmaking has so evolved these days,” Joli-Coeur notes. “In the beginning, the NFB was one of the few places where you had all the facilities to make a film under one roof. Now we are able to work with freelancers everywhere from their own spaces. But we're still that incubator of talent, where treasures can be created.”

With that evolution has come some tension in the relationships with a generation of filmmakers, many of whom seek an NFB that provides more direct engagement with the organization's programming process, better compensation and a review of how the NFB allocates its funding.

From January to March 2020, Joli-Coeur travelled across Canada to meet with members of the independent film community, including animation, documentary and interactive creators and producers. In nine cities and through English and French webcasts, the Commissioner, along with senior NFB staff, listened to concerns and complaints from the dozens of participants, and engaged in conversation with them as the NFB was preparing its next strategic plan.

in the world for filmmaking. This freedom is very crucial for the development of cinema in Canada.”

That future will continue to include the fruitful and unexpected connections artists make with new technology through the NFB, now engaging with, for example, haptic tech that blurs the distinction between the digital and physical worlds, as well as using artificial intelligence to bring new perspectives into its creative applications.

The tour was organized in collaboration with the Canadian Media Producers Association (CMPA), the Documentary Organization of Canada (DOC), the Directors Guild of Canada (DGC), l'Association des réalisateurs et réalisatrices du Québec (ARRQ) and ONF/NFB Creation.

More than 80 percent of respondents to the pre-tour survey indicated that the decline in recent years of the NFB's spending on production was the most vital issue for them, while the NFB's relationship with the creative community was a close second in importance. Of course, these concerns are inextricably linked, and the Commissioner reasserted his commitment to seek out new sources of funding for the NFB by expanding strategic partnerships.

The NFB explained and defended the amounts allocated to non-production categories, while citing the drop in the overall NFB allocation from the federal government, which has squeezed its ability to evolve, or even to keep up with a growing filmmaking community and dramatic changes in the Canadian and global media ecosystem.

Joli-Coeur sought filmmakers' collaboration in defining the future of the NFB. “We take seriously their concerns about an institution they treasure as vital to the creative life of the country, and to its body politic. I share with them the absolute belief that the core value and potential of the NFB remain a critical part of the Canadian cultural and social experiment. Their expertise and sincere love for the institution have made it possible to refocus their place within the institution. This dialogue, even if it was sometimes difficult, was beneficial for them, for the NFB and for our entire industry.” As one filmmaker put it, the NFB is “the biggest laboratory

The pivotal place of creators in a renewed organization was underlined by the NFB's first National Forum, held online in 2021 with more than 100 participants from across production and storytelling disciplines, and connecting filmmakers, distribution and marketing staff and collaborators from within and outside the NFB. The Forum was a key part of the NFB's new Strategic Plan imperative to “offer programming that is cohesive, integrated and responsive,” and to ensure that creation and audience engagement are always “at the heart of its decisions and actions.” For Joli-Coeur, this underlines his conviction that the NFB must always be a “place for creators.”

Almost 25 years into the new century, and as he prepares to end his time as Commissioner, Joli-Coeur reflects on the NFB's role and its future:

“The world has changed. Any organization, in the public sector or the private sector, now must approach the very idea of planning with humility and imagination, but also with a commitment to preserving what is most essential. So many certainties have been cracked. No institution is exempt from scrutiny, and from self-reflection.



“Our role as a public producer and distributor must always be a work in progress. We need to constantly redefine how we achieve our public service mission, especially now in a world that has become hyper-commercialized and borderless. Public producers of audiovisual works are playing an increasingly crucial role around the world, but their funding is often fragile, and their relevance questioned.

“There is an urgency to our task of crafting new ways of storytelling for new ways of seeing. The gaze of the artist is essential. These guardians of our conscience will help us imagine the future, considering all of its aspects and ensuring that nobody is left by the wayside.

“The NFB's mission has never been more strikingly relevant.”



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