

SPEECH BY WENDY LILL
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Good morning. It's great to be here.

I want to thank the CCA for inviting me to take part in the Chalmers Conference. I am delighted to have a chance to share some of my experiences as a Member of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage.

It's also just wonderful for me to be back here in Ottawa for the first time in over eight months – to connect with my friends in the arts community and my former colleagues on Parliament Hill.

I realized as I sat down at the beginning of this week - to work on what I was going to say,

that by the end of the week - today, - the government may have in fact fallen, the 308 MPS may have all scurried off home to try to hold onto their seats... and this conference - short of some scheduled political guests.

In any event, if that had happened, or not - the fact remains that the atmosphere in Ottawa right now is comparable to the fall of Saigon;

- the helicopters have landed on the roofs and everyone is scrambling to position themselves - to get out, or in this

case, somehow, to come out ON TOP when the dust settles.

Such is the political imperative of this place - in its most swollen, glorious, fully-extended state.

Elections come along and blow many good and important things right out of the water...

Another abiding truth here in Ottawa is that politicians, especially government politicians - respond to public pressure.

This has become such a truism that we perhaps ignore its implications. But it has to be front and center in deciding where to put energy and resources.

If you don't have public support that you can point to or call on or mobilize, it is exceptionally hard to be heard above the clamour of conflicting interests in this place.

And Politicians respond to polls.

Recently, an NDP colleague of mine had a meeting with a high level government minister to advocate for more support for Foreign Aid and First Nations children. She was astonished by his candid and unapologetic admission that unfortunately, those were two areas that don't register in polling.

Simplistically and crassly, in the political environment existing today, if it's not showing up in the polls, it probably will not make it into a line item in the budget.

This week in his TV column in the Globe and Mail, John Doyle was reflecting on the recent flurry of activities on the Canadian TV front - including the government's underwhelming 'second' response' to the Lincoln Report, and the latest impassioned plea by Sarah Polley and Don McKellar to invest in Canadian stories for Canadian screens.

Doyle said, and I quote, "It has become abundantly clear that the country is in the hands of a shifty bunch of politicians whose governing rationale is to answer the question - what's in it for me?"

In the case of supporting Canadian TV, there isn't even a useful photo-op in it for a politician." Unquote.

So if there isn't a photo-op, an opportunity for a grab and grin - as they call it, it's tough going!

As we all know, support for increased regional broadcasting, maintaining Canadian ownership restrictions on broadcasting, fighting for sustained multiyear funding for the Tomorrow Starts Today program, advocating for income averaging, EI and other benefits for self employed cultural workers.....are all critical for the health and sustainability of Canadian cultural landscape - but they are not photo-op material.

These are the solid foundational issues that give the country strength like public health care, and clean air and water - that we don't appreciate until they're gone.

So of course we have to fight for them.

So how do advocates for the Arts make an impact here in this place and move the political agenda in an arts friendly direction?

I've been asked here today to share my observations about parliamentary committees, how to approach them, what Members need to hear in a submission, what works, what doesn't and how the cultural sector can best get its message across.

In 1997, I became the NDP critic for Culture and became a member of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage.

I can still remember walking into that room - with its huge rectangular table, the high ceilings, and massive windows, the green leather chairs, the microphones, the control rooms and translators and all those suits and earnest faces, and thinking – what in hell am I doing here?

I felt like Alice in Wonderland. That feeling continued through my time there.

But in many ways, I became very comfortable with that wonderland. I became very impressed with the quality of work that I saw accomplished there.

During my seven years in the committee, we undertook three important landmark cultural studies - requested by the government - to aid them in their job of governance.

A Sense of Place – a Sense of Being was a two year study undertaken to gauge the evolving role of the federal government in support of Canadian culture.

Right after that, the Committee was instructed by the Minister of Culture at the time, Sheila Copps, to make recommendations to her on the state of the Canadian book publishing industry, in light of the rise of Larry Stevenson's Big Box book stores, aka Chapters, and the demise of hundreds of small independent book sellers across the country.

And in 2003 - after two years of extremely difficult and acrimonious wranglings, we finally finished Our Cultural Sovereignty– the Second Century of Canadian Broadcasting; now referred to as The Lincoln Report after the Chair of the Committee, Clifford Lincoln.

Each study was complete with many public hearings, hundreds of submissions, much travel....each study led to a major report which was tabled in the House of Commons;

Each study created a huge amount of work for presenters, for translators and for travel agents...

It generated many air tickets for presenters, and headaches for schedulers. But all of this aside, I believe it provided a meeting place of ideas; it provided a chance for good people to sit together and dream about their country.

With the Culture Study, it was a chance to take the pulse of the culture and the culture makers in Canada.

We had the privilege of hearing from hundreds of artists, creators, painters, playwrights as well as representatives from vastly different groups such as arts organizations, media conglomerates and tiny rural museums.

People with enormous passion and commitment to their art and to the country they create it in.

Over and over, the Committee heard the themes; the unquenchable desire of artists to create and reflect their experience; the importance of the CBC; the need for a strong Canada Council and the important role which the federal government has played in nurturing Canadian culture.

We also heard about the impact of fiscal cutbacks on all cultural institutions, and on the ability of our artists to make a living.

As a committee we got on planes and trains and buses together and traveled across the country to hear what Canadians had to say.

We all ate the same rubber chicken and talked about our families, and why we became MPs, and what we had done before.

Each and every one of those MPs who you see misbehaving in Question Period, actually does have a mother who loved them, actually probably can articulate some quite powerful and convincing reasons why he or she is there. Their reasons all sound more or less alike - to make a difference and because I love this country.

In hearings, much of the partisan armour and rhetoric falls away as we all confronted the same human beings before us such as the heartfelt pleas to sustain the CBC's regional presence,

One woman in an Northern community told us how she had been listening to the CBC broadcast from the regional center 500 kms away, and the announcer said; "it's a beautiful day out there ladies! Why not get out and enjoy it." And then moments later, when she opened the door to take her baby for a walk, she saw a whole host of others opening their doors and venturing out just like her.

We were all moved by that image – even the Reform member who started his stint on the committee extremely

anti-CBC. By the time we got “off the bus”, even Inky Marks had become a convert to public broadcasting.

When we finally got to the writing stage of the report, there had been lots of movement amongst the members as to their preconceived ideas.

The report recommended continued and stable funding for the CBC, Copyright and Status of the Arts Legislation, increased support to educational institutions, and cultural training initiatives, as well as a federal recommitment to our libraries, archives, museums and built heritage. The warm fuzzy feelings and the bridges we have built with one another alas were not significant enough to overcome some major ideological differences that existed. We never did tackle the problem of foreign ownership of our film distribution system, Or the almost complete foreign takeover of our book publishing houses. Nor could we agree to make recommendations on media concentration and how it impacts on the abilities of Canadians to hear and express diverse opinions.

With regards to the Book publishing report, the Heritage Committee could not, astonishingly, bring itself to address the central question facing it and that was tackling the hugely destructive effect of corporate concentration and ownership on the creation of culture.

That was in my mind, as a New Democrat and an artist, a great shame and a huge betrayal to the hundreds, thousands

of people who came before the committee seeking leadership.

Some would have us believe that Culture is created by Disney and then direct fed into the popular culture pipeline. But in fact, Culture is, by definition, local, small, regional, then it becomes universal. It is then given to the world.

The Broadcast study - that many of us thought would never end - and which produced a telephone book size document - did in fact provide a blueprint for bringing Canada's broadcasting system into the 21st century.

It provided a big picture investigation of the state of our cultural sovereignty. It made tough recommendations about the CRTC and commercial broadcasters. It called for a reversal of the 1999 relaxation of rules demanding Canadian drama on Canadian TV.

The question of foreign ownership was no-brainer for the Heritage Committee.

Members of all parties except – note well - the Canadian Alliance/ Conservative Party – agreed that any loosening of Canadian ownership rules for media would be a perilous step.

Many Canadian media companies, not to mention the entire cultural community as well as the ordinary citizens who

spoke out on the question, favour maintaining Canadian media in Canadian hands.

To imagine that Viacom or Sony would become major producers of Canadian programming is to live in a fantasy world.

I have described these three Parliamentary Committee studies because I believe they are examples of Committee doing – for the most part - good work.

The mere act of undertaking such inquiries forces issues onto the table, allows ordinary citizens and advocates and major players to express their concerns and bring forward new ideas and solutions.

The MPs developed considerable expertise and were able to co-operate across party lines.

Parliamentary Committees made up of Members of Parliament from all different political stripes can, in fact, come together and do good work.

The one big hitch is this; they are extremely dependent on good information made available to them.

I want to stop for a moment and talk about the lowly Members of Parliament because they are kind of the building blocks of the whole system.

MPs are bombarded with far more information than they can possibly process or make sense of.

It is really was one of the most stunning realizations I had when I went to Ottawa.

Are those Cabinet Ministers you see being interviewed on TV during the evening news, really only one briefing note away from being exposed and embarrassed? I think in many cases yes.

In federal politics, you jump into a fast moving river and you're just trying to keep your head above water.

You are extremely dependent on information being provided at the right time, in the right place and in the right form.

Lobbyists have known this for a long time; providing people with sound bites and sparklers is their stock and trade.

A good part of an MP's time is spent having meetings with people who want to put forward their ideas and persuade them in a certain direction.

Throughout all three of the studies I have mentioned, the role of advocacy groups such as CCA, Friends of Canadian Broadcasting, were absolutely essential in providing the information and the statistics needed to show the impact of government policies, or lack of same on the individual creators and on the cultural environment of the country.

The efforts that the CCA makes to educate the Members , the new critics, going over the same territory over and over again were - Herculean!

The hundreds of phone calls and visits the CCA makes to Members offices in the course of a parliament, or in mounting a particular arts campaign are not in vain. It's like spreading seeds, albeit on what seems like hostile barren land. But some things sprout! And talking to MPs, getting information to MPS is critical to moving the arts agenda forward in Ottawa.

Meeting with MPs in their ridings, sitting down with them to discuss the importance of The Tomorrow Starts Today Fund, or the need for status of the Arts legislation, telling real life anecdotes, putting a human face and a community face on issues is equally important. It's kind of like a one two punch. You talk to the MPs back home and then chances are those are the anecdotes that MPs bring back to Ottawa and reach for when they give speeches in the House of Commons or when they need to speak in committee.

Those are the seeds of ideas that will get into the public record, Hansard, or into the official transcripts of parliamentary committees.

I found out early that if it's not in the transcripts, it won't make it to the report.

Ideas have to be put forward in committee. They have to be batted about and get on the record.

If Members are given prior briefing on an issue - through documentations, phone calls, meetings, along with brief clear notes and possible questions to be asked at committee then they will be a lot more comfortable asking those questions in committee and seeking answers which will deepen the committees understanding on an issue.

And when they ask those questions to the presenters, they might spark a controversy within a hearing which would then be picked up by the media.

They could in fact help to frame the story coming out of the hearing for the day, thereby deepening public awareness of the issue.

Often issues are so complex that MPS don't even know what questions to ask;

It is critical that advocacy groups provide them with questions to ask and also some answers - if they have them.

Often I would make calls around to advocacy groups to find out what was known on a subject and what wasn't - what needed to be researched. Sometimes MPs know what information they need but are frustrated in their ability to get it.

Many times during the Broadcasting Study, I asked the researchers attached to the study to provide important information needed to gauge the health of the Broadcast system and was told time and time again, that it wasn't available.

I was told the statistics didn't exist. Or I was simply put off. Calls not returned. Written requests for information went unanswered.

It never ceased to amaze me that sometimes the Friends of Canadian Broadcasting could put together statistics with their limited resources, that the huge statistical arsenal of the federal government was unable to get a hold of.

It was only through the help of advocacy organizations such as CCA , the Writers Guild, Friends of Canadian Broadcasting, that the committee and the MPs were able to begin to do some of the critical research needed for our studies.

Advocacy Groups keep committee honest, down to earth and focused on what is really going on in the country outside the walls of the committee rooms.

I have focused mainly on committee work here but I would like to touch briefly on the important role advocacy groups can have in the House of Commons in shaping the debate on a piece of legislation.

Every Member of Parliament who speaks in the House on a Bill always has at least a couple of sheets of notes in front of them.

If you watch a debate, you will hear the same anecdotes, stories, figures trotted out over and over again.

Members are dependent on getting good information to help them make sense of issues, to give them an ease in speaking about them. They need help humanizing and personalizing things. So they can get up and talk – from the heart.

Twice in the past seven years, NDP members – first Nelson Riis , in 1999 and then myself in 2003, introduced private members motions in the House seeking tax breaks for Artists.

Everyone in this room knows that it is not big business or governments who provide the biggest subsidies to the Arts in Canada.

It is the individual artists , who work year in year out for poverty wages, without any security, to create their art.

The changes the NDP sought to give eager breaks to Artists within the Income Tax Act would not have broken the bank;

The bill was more about recognition and respect for the creators in our country.

Although we were not successful in convincing the government or the Reform/Alliance that Art and culture in fact special in the life of the nation. But we had a good debate and we moved some hearts and minds.

And we brought Art and Culture to the floor of the House of Commons and opened it up for debate.

And we increased public awareness and we moved the rock forward a little bit.

Throughout that debate, throughout the debate on changes to the child pornography laws that were intent on removing the defence of artistic merit, the CCA was always there providing information, examples, human narratives of what the implications of changing the legislation would have.

And they were also physically there!

I can still picture looking up at the gallery and seeing Meagan Williams and Phillipa Bourgal, and in the last year with the Child Pornography Bill, James Missen joined them, to offer support and answer questions and to cheer people on as they stood up for the arts.

And so my friends, in closing I leave you with something I deeply believe and which wasn't beaten out of me in seven years of federal politics.

Advocacy groups provide the anchor and the stability in very fast changing environments. They make sure that the interests of their constituencies are not lost in the fast moving river of federal politics.

They play an essential role in framing debates and quite frankly in making MPs better and smarter than they would have been otherwise!

And so when you sometimes wonder whether you have the energy to muster one more report, or submission to a committee, or one more Arts Campaign during an election, or one more email or telephone call to a politician to say one more time “Culture is important”, to say “It is Art and Culture that truly legislate the heart of the nation”, believe me, it is worth doing. Just do it.

Say it. It does make a difference. Thank you.