

APRIL 30, 2008

CALGARY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

PAUL GROSS – PASSCHENDAELE

I'd like to thank the Chamber of Commerce for inviting me and pay particular attention to Lois Mitchell for both her support and encouragement that I should be here to speak to you, although she neglected to mention the formal nature of the dinner – in fact, she characterized it as an informal cocktail party. Sneaky but effective.

I thought I would expand just a little on what has been said about Passchendaele the movie. It has been a particularly long and grueling road to bring this film to the screen. I started writing sketches for the movie almost 15 years ago. It has taken Niv Fichman and me almost ten years to put the film into production and it will finally appear on the screens in October of this year.

In the course of this undertaking, not only did we tackle a subject of considerable scope, one that is intimately concerned with the formative event in our nation's history; not only is the film itself unusually ambitious for Canadian cinema; not only is the finished film epic in scale the actual nuts and bolts of financing and executing this film has challenged the status quo of making movies in Canada.

We brought the private sector back into the movie business and this is a significant departure. For far too many years now the private sector has been shut out of Canadian film making – deliberately so.

It was not always the case. We used to have a way for the private sector to be involved and the mechanism was through tax deferral funds. These funds were shut down because of various abuses and loopholes. While there were undoubtedly abuses of the system it is also true that an enormous amount of good was generated by their existence and surely there are sufficient numbers of whip smart individuals that could re-tool such funds so that the loopholes were closed.

What was such an eye-opener for Niv and me in the course of financing Passchendaele is that the private sector is interested in what we do, that there are a great number of individuals and institutions that would like to be involved. And yet the system of making movies is so hermetically sealed that they are deterred from doing so. The time has come for us to re-think how we go about making film and television.

There are too persuasive reasons for doing this. First, the private sector has all the money. Secondly, it's good for the country.

The common good of our nation would be immeasurably strengthened if all sectors of the nation were engaged in our cultural output. If the only contributor to culture is the

government then the citizenry come to feel it is something forced upon them and as a result they will eventually resent it and come to see it as part of a 'welfare culture'.

Nowhere is this problem more in evidence than in our varying attitudes toward our public broadcaster. Yes, I know, and I'm sorry but I am talking about the CBC. Allow me to digress for a second on the subject of the Corp because our relationship to it is revealing in terms of our relationship to culture in general.

There are a great number of people who resent the CBC and, importantly, they have come to believe that they should have the choice in whether or not they support it. This strikes me as a strange understanding of taxation. Taxation isn't a buffet we get to pick and choose from. I don't drive on roads in the Yukon, yet I pay for them and I'm happy to do so. I'm not sick at the moment but I'm paying for hospitals and I'm happy to do so.

When we talk about the public broadcaster the discussion is often muddied by many noisy voices -- some love it blindly, some loathe it blindly. Some would like to see it immediately blown up and at the moment I'm almost inclined to agree with them.

But this is a bad idea. A very bad idea. The public broadcaster is our broadcaster in the same way the government is our government and our government can be changed and improved by our involvement. In the same way, the public broadcaster can evolve and change and improve but it needs our engagement.

I'll never forget shooting something in Ottawa and being up with the bells at the top of the Peace Tower. I read a plaque that said the CBC's first broadcast was of those carillon bells and it was sent out to the entire nation, binding us together in one shared moment. The CBC of today faces many challenges and can easily be allowed to drift into oblivion but I guarantee you if it were to disappear we would all miss it terribly because it continues to afford us an indispensable national service.

In many ways, whither goes the CBC so goes the culture of our country. In the same sense that our discourse on the Corp is out of kilter, it is also true that our cultural systems are unbalanced and unhealthy.

Historically, nations in western society have been healthy when they have achieved a balance in terms of cultural support between the state and the citizenry. Long ago this balance featured the Roman Catholic Church and the nobility. Subsequently the balance was between the monarchy and the merchant class. More recently it has been between elected government and the private sector.

As I said earlier, the private sector in Canada has been actively deterred from engagement. I would appeal tonight that we invite the private sector back into the film business so that we can return it to balance and raise it to a robust and competitive business.

We need this because the film and television business is the canary in the cultural coalmine. If our film business falters, all other cultural arms will follow suit. And should this happen we will lose our talented people at a rate even more alarming than we currently lose them. And we do lose them.

This is a short list, by no means complete: Keanu Reeves, Martin Short, Dan Ackroyd, Jim Kerry, Mike Meyers, Paul Haggis, Ryan Gosling, Rachel McAdams. And the list goes on. Canadians power much of Hollywood, direct movies, write television shows and produce films.

Why are they not here? Why do they not return and work in Canada? Other talent from other nations work in Hollywood yet return to their home countries. The UK is obvious. But let's look at Australia, a sister colony. Russell Crowe, Guy Pierce, Nicole Kidman all return and take part in their national culture. This is not the case in Canada because our business has not been able to provide them a sufficiently attractive reason. In spite of our achievements with Passchendaele, Niv and I know all too well that one film cannot turn the corner. The film business in Canada is calcified and in desperate need of an overhaul.

Now, you may be asking yourself why does this matter? I would argue it is central to the health of our nation. I'm not sure we're in all that great shape, nationally. In fact, I think we're wobbly. Some areas of the country are doing well; others not so well. The divide between Quebec and the rest of Canada is deeper than at any time in my life. And regionally we're starting to splinter. What is it that can knit us together?

In an increasingly borderless world we must look to our culture to help define who we are. But right now our cultural policy is adrift. It has been a very long time since we've had any cultural overview. One of the main reasons for this is that successive governments have had little or no interest in the cultural sector. In fact, the last time a government truly engaged in the film and television business was under Brian Mulroney. Chretien couldn't have cared less about it. Martin wasn't around long enough to do anything. And Harper is an economist who likes hockey.

I don't say that as a criticism; I just don't think the arts interest him.

But as the leader of our country, they should. And this is not an ideological position. This is the position of a Canadian nationalist.

It boils down to this: a country cannot be defined by its economy alone. When you're travelling abroad and let's say you're in a bar in Quito and the bartender asks you about Canada you don't say "we're contemplating a trade agreement with Columbia". Or if you're in Zagreb and a cab driver asks the same question you don't answer, "we have an exciting trade arrangement with Mexico and the States." As exciting as inter-provincial trade and as thrilling as the movement of the GST up or down a point, as entrancing as the conversation about the fiscal imbalance can be – as exciting as all this is, it is not enough to define a country.

When we think of England we don't immediately think of its membership in the EU. We think, instead, of Shakespeare and Westminster Abbey and the Beatles. When we think of France it's not their membership in the Francophonie that springs to mind. It's her wine and Moliere and Renoir. A nation is much more than its financial budgets and its trade arrangements.

A healthy nation, one with long lasting power, is a nation where the economy hums and the regions thrive and its citizens prosper and the whole apparatus is held together by the sinews of its culture. And if those sinews are to be strong we all have to contribute. Even if we're on different sides, even if we disagree we all have to add our part to the unfolding story of our country.

I am often asked what I think Canadian identity is. For years I tried to come up with an answer and for years I failed. It finally dawned on me that the question – what is Canada? – the question itself is the answer. We are evolving, changing, unfolding and our story is not yet finished, not finished by a long shot.

In this great narrative all our voices must contribute. It worked on Passchendaele and it can work again. I entreat you all to engage in your cultural life. After all, it's your story.

In closing, I would encourage you all to consider these words and when I knock on your door in the future you will remember them and you will give me a lot of money.

Thank you.