

The Origins of Public Broadcasting: The Commission of Government and the Creation of the Broadcasting Corporation of Newfoundland

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The Origins of Public Broadcasting: The Commission of Government and the Creation of the Broadcasting Corporation of Newfoundland

HISTORIANS IN MANY COUNTRIES HAVE examined the development of public broadcasting systems. In Britain the government created a paternalistic state-monopoly-broadcaster as a vehicle to improve public taste and education, and as a reaction to the unabashed commercialism of American radio.¹ Even in the birthplace of commercial radio, some Americans unsuccessfully tried to encourage their government to develop a public network to ensure that the technology would be used for greater things than selling chewing gum.² Canadian historians have often placed the mixed private and public ownership of radio in Canada somewhere along a continuum between the British and American experiences. They have also accepted the notion that the CBC was both an ideological compromise between the United States and Britain and a nationalist reaction to American popular culture being broadcast across the border.³ Recently, historians have questioned this interpretation. They have emphasized that public broadcasting advocates were motivated by desires both to counter commercialism and to foster the moral improvement of Canadians.⁴

This revision can only be encouraged by a comparison with the public radio debate that occurred within the government of Newfoundland during the 1930s. The Broadcasting Corporation of Newfoundland opened in March of 1939, and served

- 1 Asa Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting: The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, Volume 1* (London, 1961) and D.L. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain Between the Wars* (Oxford, 1988).
- 2 Robert W. McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy: The Battle for the Control of U.S. Broadcasting, 1928-1935* (New York, Oxford, 1993).
- 3 Margaret Prang, "The Origins of Public Broadcasting in Canada", *Canadian Historical Review*, XLVI, 1 (March 1965) pp. 1-31, and Frank W. Peers, *The Politics of Canadian Broadcasting 1920-1951* (Toronto, 1969).
- 4 For recent re-interpretations of public broadcasting in Canada see: Kenneth C. Dewar, "The Origins of Public Broadcasting in Canada in Comparative Perspective", *Canadian Journal of Communications*, 8, 2 (1982), pp. 26-45; Michael Nolan, "An Infant Industry: Canadian Private Radio 1919-36", *Canadian Historical Review*, LXX, 4 (1989), pp. 496-7; Marc Raboy, *Missed Opportunities: The Story of Canada's Broadcasting Policy* (Montreal and Kingston, 1990); and Mary Vipond, *Listening In: The First Decade of Canadian Broadcasting 1922-1932* (Kingston and Montreal, 1992).

Jeff A. Webb, "The Origins of Public Broadcasting: The Commission of Government and the Creation of the Broadcasting Corporation of Newfoundland", *Acadiensis*, XXIV, 1 (Autumn 1994), pp. 88-106.

Newfoundlanders until it was incorporated into the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in 1949. In neither Canada nor Newfoundland was broadcasting policy the result primarily of ideological compromise or nationalist reaction. In the case of Newfoundland, the Commissioners and their advisors were not concerned about the influence of American culture, nor were they trying to construct a national identity. Public officials in Newfoundland, as elsewhere, objected to the culture of the lowest common denominator that commercial radio seemed to encourage, but this was not their primary motive. The principal motivation for creating a Newfoundland equivalent of the BBC and CBC was its potential as a tool to effect social change. As such, it fit into the Commission's broader agenda of preparing the country for the return to responsible government. Furthermore, the non-democratic nature of the Newfoundland state influenced the government's broadcasting policy. The Commission feared that those who opposed the government might use the radio to foster a popular revolt, yet wanted to avoid the accusation of censorship that might result if it banned political discussions. These political considerations led the government to consider many different schemes before deciding upon a system analogous to the BBC and CBC.

Broadcasting policy in Newfoundland was especially important given the unusual political conditions that existed in the Dominion during the late 1930s. Newfoundland had chosen not to enter into the union of colonies with the rest of British North America in the 1860s, instead continuing to evolve towards greater autonomy and independence, culminating in the achievement of formal status as a Dominion in 1927.⁵ Newfoundland's economy was precarious, however, and with the contraction of world trade that accompanied the Depression the government faced serious financial difficulties. These problems led to the loss of self-government and the reversion to something approximating the status of a crown colony in 1934. At this point, the British government was unwilling to lend money to Newfoundland without control over the spending of that money. Administration of the island, therefore, passed to the Governor, as Chairman, and six appointed commissioners, three from Britain and three from Newfoundland.⁶ The British-born commissioners occupied the posts that involved financial responsibility (Finance, Public Utilities and Natural Resources), while the three Newfoundlanders assumed control over Home Affairs and Education, Justice, and Public Health and Welfare. The Amulree Report, which had recommended the establishment of the Commission of Government, also sought to justify the abrogation of democratic government. To accomplish this, it blamed Newfoundlanders for moral failure in not avoiding political corruption and pauperism.

In response to the Amulree Report, the British established a Commission of Government, with a mandate to reform Newfoundland's political and economic structure before restoring democracy. The Amulree report advocated many economic

5 William C. Gilmore, *Newfoundland and Dominion Status: The External Affairs Competence and International Law Status of Newfoundland, 1855-1934* (Toronto, 1988).

6 The standard work on the Commission Government is Peter Neary, *Newfoundland in the North Atlantic World, 1929-1949* (Montreal and Kingston, 1988).

and administrative reforms which the Commission enacted with varying degrees of success. But the Commissioners believed that economic revitalization without a corresponding change in Newfoundland culture would fail. The Amulree report itself had recommended that the Commission undertake to transform the way that Newfoundlanders thought about themselves and their government:

What is needed is the inculcation of a new morale and a new spirit of self-reliance; it would indeed only intensify the difficulties of the country if the restoration of the physical condition of the people were to be unaccompanied by a change in mental outlook, and if, as a result of past experience, they were to continue in the belief that it was the duty of the Government to satisfy all their wants, without any corresponding exertion on their own part.⁷

The Report said little about how this was to be carried out, but, given the widespread enthusiasm for radio broadcasting during the 1920s and 1930s, it is not surprising that the Commission turned to broadcasting as a tool to effect the political re-education it judged Newfoundlanders needed.

In September 1934 the newly installed Commission of Government turned its attention to radio broadcasting. The opportunity for an enlarged government role in broadcasting was presented by the forthcoming amalgamation of the two largest privately-owned commercial stations, VONF and VOGY. The British-born Commissioner for Public Utilities, Thomas Lodge, presented a proposal for the creation of a shared commercial and public station. The scheme had been drafted by one of the British civil servants who had been seconded from the General Post Office, which was responsible for regulating broadcasting in Britain. Under the plan, the station's private owners would have complete control over the station between six and eight p.m. and would be allowed to sell time for sponsored programmes. At other times the programming would be controlled by a committee appointed by the government and the station would function as a public education broadcaster.⁸ This managing committee would be made up of citizens who could be counted upon to promote the kind of reformist educational programming that the Commission favoured.⁹ The Department of Posts and Telegraphs would have a representative on the Committee, and the current manager of the commercial station

7 *Newfoundland Royal Commission 1933 Report (Amulree Report)* Cmd. 4480, p. 222.

8 Memorandum to the Commission, 29 September 1934, GN 38, S7-1-1, file 1, Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador [PANL].

9 The committee would consist of Dr. John Grieve as Chair, Charles Hutton, and Frederick R. Emerson. Hutton was the owner of a music store and a well known "art music" figure. St. John's lawyer Fred Emerson had received classical music training in Europe, but also had an interest in folk music. Neil Rosenberg reports that "he was a central figure in the intellectual life of the elite class, conducting at various times private music appreciation courses and reading circles which probed the work of such authors as Dante in the original Italian". Neil Rosenberg, "Folksong in Newfoundland: A Research History", Conrad Laforte, ed., *Ballades et Chansons Folkloriques* (Quebec, 1989), pp. 49-50.

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VONF, William Galgay, would continue in that role. The committee would determine what programming was appropriate and, though free to use foreign programmes, would have as its primary purpose making Newfoundland programmes available throughout the country. The plan was mute on the specifics of this programming, except to stipulate that certain hours were to be made available for both school broadcasts and adult lectures on the fishery, farming and similar topics. For a net expenditure of \$5,500 the Commission could achieve control over broadcasting and all competing stations would be put out of business, thus giving the Broadcasting Company - Government alliance a monopoly.¹⁰ The idea of giving a private company a monopoly of broadcasting had precedents. The British Broadcasting Company, the predecessor of the British Broadcasting Corporation, had been a privately-owned monopoly.¹¹ In Newfoundland, the Atlantic Telegraph Company had enjoyed a monopoly of transatlantic telegraphic communication, and the Reid family had held a monopoly over many areas of transportation and communication.

The Commission needed the approval of the Dominions Office and the British Treasury before undertaking any large expenditures, so it asked the Commissioner of Finance, E.N.R. Trentham, to investigate the financial details of the new scheme and the extent to which local broadcasting would be useful for the government.¹² Trentham argued that Newfoundland's requirements were not being met by the existing commercial stations, and encouraged the Dominions Office to move into broadcasting.¹³ During the summer, he reported, long-wave reception was impossible until late at night, and few people owned short-wave receivers. During the winter, when reception would normally be better, atmospheric conditions often made reception impossible. As things stood, local stations were received only within a small radius, but, under the proposed plan, he thought most of the country could be covered. The broadcasting commission would get about 500 hours of on-air time, which would have cost at least \$6,000 if it had to be purchased at prevailing commercial rates. Additional moneys to help defray the costs of a public station could also be raised. Since the government admitted that its efforts to prevent electrical interference with broadcasting were insufficient, it had not been vigilant in enforcing the licensing regulations. Trentham estimated that vigorous collection of the license fees could result in the collection of an additional \$7,000 which could finance the new station's operating costs.¹⁴

The proposal reached the desk of P.A. Clutterbuck, a senior Dominions Office official who had helped to draft the Amulree report in 1934. Clutterbuck was

10 Memorandum to the Commission, 29 September 1934, GN, 38 S7-1-1, file 1, PANL.

11 Asa Briggs, *The Golden Age of Wireless: The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom Volume II* (London, 1965), p. 3.

12 Note for Mr. Trentham, November 1934, pp. 4-5, Microfilm Reel B4947, DO 35/505/N1071/2, National Archives of Canada [NAC].

13 Trentham to Clutterbuck, 5 December 1934, p. 10, Microfilm Reel B-4947, DO 35/505/N1071/3, NAC.

14 Copy of Memo for Commissioner of Finance, 1 December 1934, pp. 11, 13, Microfilm Reel B-4947, DO 35/505/N1071/3, NAC.

undecided about public broadcasting for Newfoundland. He doubted that the proposed broadcasting company could finance itself, and also found the argument that the government should subsidize “entertainment” unconvincing in light of his belief that the radio receivers all contained both short and long-wave capabilities.¹⁵ Despite these reservations, Clutterbuck submitted the plan to the Treasury. For its part, the Treasury wanted reassurances that Britain would not be liable for greater expenditures if the scheme failed, a response that Clutterbuck thought was unduly “gloomy”. To aid in the re-evaluation of broadcasting policy, the Dominions Office provided for two British experts seconded from the British Broadcasting Corporation to visit Newfoundland.¹⁶ It is not surprising that these officials found the situation in Newfoundland unsatisfactory and that they recommended the creation of a public network similar to the BBC.

The first of the BBC officials to visit Newfoundland was no stranger to the practice of radio taking a paternalistic role or to the use of broadcasting in the service of the imperial government. C.G. Graves had been, at different times, both the BBC’s Controller of Programmes, a senior management position within the corporation, and its Director of the Empire and Foreign Service. Graves was unimpressed by the state of broadcasting he found in Newfoundland and recommended that the Commission adopt a more ambitious policy. He reported that the “only broadcasting worthy of the name” was that of the Dominion and Newfoundland Broadcasting Companies, VONF and VOGY respectively, both of which were now under the control of R.J. Murphy. A local businessman, Murphy was also Managing Director of the Avalon Telephone Company and the United Towns Electric Company.¹⁷ Graves thought that vesting so much control in the hands of one person was ill-advised. He also identified other problems. Graves suggested that the advertising revenue was small, less than \$30 per week, because advertisers were wary of entering into long-term contracts when the future of broadcasting was so uncertain. Furthermore, with the exception of VOGY, the equipment was obsolete and inappropriate.¹⁸ Though these stations were sometimes heard in all parts of the island, this was so infrequent as to be a freak occurrence. On the west coast, reception of the St. John’s stations was impossible at night due to overlapping Canadian and American signals. At the moment, stations were broadcasting only four or five hours each day, and programming was poor, consisting mostly of “gramophone records, ‘spot’ announcements and a few sponsored programmes which may or may not be composed of records”.¹⁹ Of further concern to Graves was the reception of foreign broadcasts. He warned that foreign

15 Minutes, 5 December 1934, p. 1, Microfilm Reel B-4947, DO 35/505/N1071/3, NAC.

16 E.Hale (Treasury) to Clutterbuck, 16 March 1935, pp. 10-12; Clutterbuck to Hale, 2 April 1935, pp. 6-9, Microfilm Reel B-4947, DO 35/505/N1071/7, NAC.

17 For Avalon Telephone and its involvement in broadcasting see Michael McCarthy, Frank Galgay and Jack O’Keefe, *The Voice of Generations: A History of Communications in Newfoundland* (St. John’s, 1994).

18 C.G. Graves Report on Broadcasting in Newfoundland, 21 June 1935, pp. 20, 24-25, Microfilm Reel B-4947, DO 35/505/N1071/12, NAC.

19 Graves Report, p. 19.

radio, and German radio in particular, was popular, and that, along with the entertainment, came a large amount of propaganda.²⁰ This concern about the effects of German propaganda on the Empire was widespread in the BBC, and had sparked a new interest in Empire Broadcasting.²¹

Despite the problems Graves identified, he was hopeful that radio could be a positive force in Newfoundland. He suggested that it was “no exaggeration to say that in no country could wireless be a greater source of enjoyment or instruction”.²² He was also encouraged by what he thought to be the relatively wide ownership of radios, between 6,000 and 10,000 radio sets. The census later confirmed that 7,240 radios were in operation in 1935.²³ In his view, radio could be an effective tool to develop a more self-reliant culture among the people, particularly among rural Newfoundlanders:

The future of Newfoundland must be in the hands of the rising generation. For the time being, it is to be presumed, Government will continue along the present lines and one of the primary duties of the Commission will be to educate the youth of the country and to inculcate a sense of responsibility and pride of race. To effect this it would appear very necessary to keep the Outport population constantly in touch with current events and to use every means to stimulate interest, energy and enthusiasm in the work that is being undertaken to rehabilitate and develop the country.²⁴

In addition to the educational value, Graves also advocated the “use of broadcasting to maintain law and order”.²⁵ While he did not elaborate on this point, one assumes he was referring to the kind of role that the BBC had played during the 1926 General Strike and the civil unrest of the early 1930s. By playing down the extent of the disruption, the BBC had aided the government in maintaining the status quo and contributed to the collapse of the strikes. Graves himself had been involved in discussions on the use of the BBC to aid the state in maintaining public order just months before visiting Newfoundland.²⁶

Graves’ recommendations went further toward government control over broadcasting than the Commission had originally proposed. He argued that a combination of “mild government control and commercial enterprise is highly

20 Graves Report, pp. 20, 23.

21 Briggs, *The Golden Age of Wireless*, p. 389 and Gerard Mansell, *Let Truth Be Told: 50 Years of BBC External Broadcasting* (London, 1982).

22 Graves Report, p. 22.

23 “Radios, Survey by Settlement and Districts”, GN 38, S5-1-5, file 5, PANL.

24 Graves Report, p. 21.

25 Graves Report, p. 23.

26 See Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting: Volume One 1922-1939, Serving the Nation* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 32-35, 47.

unsatisfactory and not conducive to progress".²⁷ He suggested shutting down all existing stations, with financial compensation to the owners, and replacing them with a broadcasting corporation along the lines of the BBC. There was, he believed, no opposition to a public monopoly on the island. Directors could be appointed to oversee the corporation, and a Director of Broadcasting would be responsible for day-to-day operations.²⁸

The BBC engineer that the Dominions Office sent to Newfoundland, H.L. Kirke, proposed a still more ambitious plan. Kirke thought that it was impossible to establish satisfactory service over the whole island with one station, and that constructing a number of stations would be neither feasible nor economical. He recommended the Commission establish a 10,000 watt station outside St. John's which would give good service within 50 miles and fair service within about 100 miles.²⁹ Kirke was impressed by the desire on the part of all classes for both Newfoundland news and for information about what the Commission was doing, but he was concerned about the ability of the poor in the outports to receive the station. It had been suggested, he reported, that provision could be made for communal listening in some of the bigger towns. In another related proposal, Lodge had suggested doing away with the license fee and removing the duty on radios and batteries to make listening more affordable.³⁰

The fact that the two BBC officials, Graves and Kirke, recommended duplicating their own organization as closely as possible, given the particulars of the Newfoundland case, is not surprising. The social mission in which the Commission was engaging in Newfoundland coincided with the BBC's perception of its role in Britain. The BBC had been created out of a desire to form British culture in a particular way. Under the leadership of John Reith, the BBC had become centralized, authoritarian and driven by a middle class paternalism. Reith personified the policy of "giving people what one believes they should like and will come to like".³¹ Public education and the fostering of elite culture were the goals of public broadcasting in Britain. It would have been surprising if the BBC officials had not argued for a similar social project in Newfoundland.

While the reports from the BBC experts were encouraging, the Commission balked at the cost of not only providing effective transmission, but also ensuring reception among the poor. The Governor, D.M. Anderson, believed that the Commissioners "would only be prepared to advocate their assumption of this responsibility if they were able to justify it on the grounds of the educational and

27 Graves Report, pp. 23-24.

28 Graves Report, pp. 26-27, 29.

29 This would cost between \$50,000 and \$75,000, and could be placed at the old Admiralty Wireless-Telegraph station at Mount Pearl, the masts of which might still be used. H.L. Kirke, "Report on technical survey of Broadcasting conditions in Newfoundland", October 1935, pp. 19, 24, 26, Microfilm Reel B-4947, DO 35/505/N1071/17, NAC.

30 Kirke Report, pp. 27-29.

31 John Reith, *Broadcast over Britain* as quoted in LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy*, p. 146.

political advantages which would result".³² Deterred by the expected costs, the Commission took no immediate action, aside from a token effort to make radio use more widespread by dropping the customs duty on radios meant for communal use in outlying areas. Reiterating its commitment to public radio, the Commission waited, hoping for the economic climate to improve.³³ Conditions did not improve, and the Commission became increasingly sensitive to criticism that it was not responsive to the needs of the public.³⁴

This general disquiet on the part of the Commission had the effect of revitalizing its interest in broadcasting. The Commissioners perceived broadcasting as an opportunity to promote their plans, and also, perhaps, to blunt the public criticism that they were not doing enough to alleviate the effects of the Depression.³⁵ In hopes of finding a less costly public broadcasting system than that proposed by Graves and Kirke, they had G.D. Frazer, the Secretary of the Department of Posts and Telegraphs, prepare yet another report on broadcasting, in the spring of 1937. Frazer argued that broadcasting policy had "become a matter of urgency and importance" now that the Department had started to enforce the license fee regulations, resulting in "wide-spread indignation throughout the whole country".³⁶ Most people on the west coast and south coast of the island were rarely able to hear any of the Newfoundland stations. Furthermore, he reported that "none of these stations, with the exception of VOGY is fit to be on the air and in any country where broadcasting was under rigid technical control, they would never have been granted a licence".³⁷ As bad as the technical matters were, Frazer thought that the quality of programming on the commercial stations was worse:

The only revenue these stations derive is from advertising and it is inevitable, therefore, that every consideration should be subordinated to that which provides the money for the stations to carry on. The result is the minimum of entertainment, information or instruction and the maximum of advertisement. There is a degree of irresponsibility and inaccuracy about the News broadcasts which sometimes is definitely prejudicial to the public interest.³⁸

That the public might be misinformed was sure to concern a government both dedicated to reforming the society and sensitive to its own image.

32 Governor to Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, 14 October 1935, pp. 17-18, Microfilm Reel B-4947, DO 35/505/N1071/17, NAC.

33 Extracts of Minutes of 110 Meeting of Commission of Government, 11-10-1935, p. 8, Microfilm Reel B-4947, DO 35/505/N1071/17, NAC.

34 Jeff Webb, "Newfoundland's National Convention, 1946-48", MA thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1987, pp.13-22 and Neary, *Newfoundland in the North Atlantic World*, pp. 76, 80-81.

35 Minutes of Commission of Government, 7 December 1936, GN 38, S-1-1-2, PANL.

36 G.D. Frazer, "Broadcasting", p. 1, GN 38, S5-1-5, file 6, PANL.

37 G.D. Frazer, "Broadcasting", p. 2.

38 G.D. Frazer, "Broadcasting", p. 4.

Additional money now existed to develop a public station. In 1936 the Department of Posts and Telegraphs raised \$5,674 in receiver license fees, and in March of 1937 it began an aggressive campaign to enforce payment. Post Office officials and plain clothes police canvassed neighbourhoods, and, if the fee were not paid, the person's name was given to the Justice Department for prosecution. As of the end of May, 500 prosecutions were under way in St. John's alone, and about 6,000 receivers had been licensed. Frazer reported that the Department had to exercise discretion in order to avoid the infliction of hardship. Many people saw their standard of living decline during the Depression, but still owned sets that they had purchased in more prosperous times. The Department's policy was to prosecute for non-payment of license fees only when it was clear that the radio owner was able, but unwilling, to pay. Frazer thought that "a hard and fast policy of compelling strict observance of the law in the case of such people as dole recipients or, in default, calling upon them to dismantle their sets, would evoke criticism which might be embarrassing to the government".³⁹ Despite these limitations, the Department of Posts and Telegraphs expected to raise about \$15,000 in license fees by the end of the 1936-37 fiscal year. But this revenue had been raised at the cost of some public antipathy. The vigorous enforcement of the licensing regulations and the 60 per cent *ad valorem* duty on radio receivers elicited demands that the government give the people something for their money.⁴⁰

Frazer argued that the Commission had three options. First, the government could leave broadcasting entirely in the hands of private enterprise, in which case "every bad feature of broadcasting ... would be intensified".⁴¹ Second, it could subsidize a private company as the department had suggested in 1934, but Frazer now thought this ill advised:

It would no doubt secure a limited objective for a limited annual expenditure, but the operating company, being a commercial concern, would naturally endeavour to make as much money as possible which would mean inevitably that the importance of the advertising side of broadcasting would be its paramount consideration. In so far as the standard of broadcasting, both technically and in the local programmes, fell short of what might be considered an efficient service it would be natural for the blame to be ascribed to the smallness of the annual subsidy.⁴²

In short, the government would have no control over the production of programming, but would get the blame for any inadequacies in the broadcasting service.

Frazer advocated a third option, closure of the commercial stations and the

39 G.D. Frazer, "Broadcasting", p. 10.

40 G.D. Frazer, "Broadcasting", pp. 8-9.

41 G.D. Frazer, "Broadcasting", p. 11.

42 G.D. Frazer, "Broadcasting", p. 13.

establishment of a government system “as an instrument in the enlightenment, instruction and entertainment of the Outport population”.⁴³ He approved of the recommendations of the British Committee on Colonial Broadcasting which advocated public radio for the colonies:

as an instrument of advanced administration, an instrument ... for the enlightenment and education of the more backward sections of the population and for their instruction in public health, agriculture etc. ... We have qualified this by pointing out that even entertainment broadcasts from British sources, and in particular the Empire service, may have over a period a considerable beneficial influence.⁴⁴

Frazer thought that this formulation was appropriate for rural Newfoundlanders. It is worth emphasizing that even “entertainment” was meant to inculcate middle class British values.

Both the Dominions Office and the Commission accepted that government control was best, but, recognizing that government involvement in broadcasting was a potentially sensitive issue, had certain reservations. The Commission had always walked a cautious path on the question of broadcasting on controversial topics. In its original proposal it had suggested that no religious broadcasts be allowed unless all denominations agreed, and that “all political discussion should be barred”.⁴⁵ The Commission also agreed that one of its members should retain control of the broadcasting corporation.⁴⁶ In London, similar views existed, but the Assistant Secretary of the Dominions Office, Eric Machtig, warned that their policy should “not expose us to criticism in Parliament on the ground that not content with the suppression of Party institutions in Newfoundland we are now dictating what the people should hear”.⁴⁷ Frazer also feared that any attempts at censorship would give rise to accusations that the government was interfering with free speech, and he noted that the department did not have the staff that would be necessary to monitor the broadcasters. To insulate the government from public protest about specific programmes, Frazer suggested appointing prominent citizens to a Programme Advisory Committee. The Committee would ensure that the station produced programmes that would both be in the public interest, and contain a fair measure of entertainment to keep the attention of the audience.⁴⁸

Criticism of the programming and the potential embarrassment of accusations of government propaganda were not the only dangers that concerned the Commission. It also worried that radio might be used to organize political dissent. J.H. Penson,

43 G.D. Frazer, “Broadcasting”, p. 15.

44 G.D. Frazer, “Broadcasting”, p. 16.

45 Memorandum to the Commission, 29 September 1934, pp. 4-5.

46 Governor to Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, 21 June 1935, pp. 14-17, Microfilm Reel B-4947, DO 35/505/N1071/12, NAC.

47 Minutes of DO Meeting, 21 June 1935, p. 1, Microfilm Reel B-4947, DO 35/505/N1071/12, NAC.

48 G.D. Frazer, “Broadcasting”, pp. 5-6, 27-28.

a British Treasury official who had been seconded to the Newfoundland treasury between 1931 and 1934, and who had served as Commissioner for Finance since 1937, feared that the Commission would be embarrassed if it were “to have to take responsibility for refusing time on the air to political agitators or other undesirable speakers”.⁴⁹ It must be remembered that the Commission worried about the potential for popular opposition to get out of hand, and had, on occasion, used the police to stamp out organizations that opposed its policies.⁵⁰ Therefore, Penson submitted a plan for a government owned station on 3 November 1937, with the proviso that “greater emphasis ... be laid on the independent character of the station”.⁵¹ By establishing an arms-length relationship between the Commission and the broadcasting Corporation, he sought to allow the corporation scope to deny those who opposed the Commission a voice, without, at the same time, leaving the Commission vulnerable to accusations of censorship.

Though it was a non-democratic body, the Commission hesitated before taking action that had no public support; but without elections it lacked the usual mechanism to assure that public opinion was on its side. Furthermore, the Commissioners could not gain the sort of “mandate” from the people to put policy into practice that elections give to governments. The Commission proceeded with its broadcasting policy in its standard way: it ensured that it would have the support of at least the most powerful segments of Newfoundland’s society. As Penson reported:

I have discussed the matter with the heads of the religious denominations. Both Archbishop Roche and Bishop White have expressed themselves in favour of a change to a central broadcasting station. The subject has been well ventilated in the press and discussed with a number of prominent citizens in the outports as well as in St. John’s. It was discussed early in August with a committee of six appointed by a large number of citizens of Grand Falls who had previously sent in a petition asking for caution to be taken. It was also discussed at a meeting in St. John’s chaired by the Mayor at the beginning of September. At both these meetings the idea of a central station publicly controlled appeared to receive unanimous approval.⁵²

The Commission noted that the Methodist College Literary Institute had debated the proposal for a public broadcasting system, with the side in favour of the Commission’s plan winning the debate. (The news reporter and radio broadcaster

49 J.H. Penson to Commission of Government, 20 July 1937, pp. 3-4, GN 38, S5-1-5, file 10, PANL.

50 James Overton, “Riots, Raids and Relief, Police, Prisons and Parsimony: The Political Economy of Public Order in Newfoundland in the 1930s”, in Elliott Leyton, William O’Grady, and James Overton, eds., *Violence and Public Anxiety: A Canadian Case* (St. John’s, 1992), pp. 195-334.

51 J.H. Penson to Commission of Government, 3 November 1937, p. 4, PANL, GN 38, S5-1-5, file 1, PANL.

52 J.H. Penson to Commission of Government, 3 November 1937, p. 3.

J.R. Smallwood was one of the speakers who favoured a public system.)⁵³ Not surprisingly, Penson had also ensured that the Board of Trade, which represented the St. John's business community, also approved of the plan.

Some opposition to a government station did exist, and the Commission kept a close eye on it. Cyril L. Parkins, the former owner of a short-lived commercial station, wrote to the *Daily News* to suggest that the Commission itself was partially responsible for the poor transmission of the privately owned stations, since it had denied them permission to increase their power and had turned down applications for new stations in rural Newfoundland.⁵⁴ "It appears", he wrote, "that if private enterprise had met with a little co-operation instead of persistent negation and repression, there would now be in existence a system that could have given far better service, even if every unit were limited to 1000 watts, than can be expected from a single unit at Mt. Pearl of 10,000 watts". Parkins suggested that private broadcasters were willing to provide educational programmes, but the government departments had not taken the initiative to supply the programming. As for entertainment, he argued, "the private station must produce a satisfying degree of listener response or die by lack of sponsors, whereas the government station may produce programmes with complete disregard for the response produced". Parkins also warned that since "the range of available programme material is out of all proportion greater than the possibility of broadcasting it ... the act of selection involves [an] ... act of exclusion". The programmer was therefore free to "administer nectar or medicine or poison", a power which amounted to a threat to free speech. Parkins argued that the money required for the public station was a great deal more than the value of the results, and it would be better spent addressing some of Newfoundland's more pressing problems.⁵⁵ Despite this protest, the Commission had ensured that the social and business elite did not oppose the establishment of the station, and all that remained was to ensure that the public broadcaster had enough autonomy from the government to minimize the danger that its activities might elicit criticism of the Commission.⁵⁶

It seems that the Commission was frustrated by its inability to get permission from the Dominions Office, and attempted to evade Whitehall's caution. It is possible that Penson's release of the plans to the public was a tactic to elicit popular demands for improved service, which the Commission could then use to pressure the Dominions Office into approving the necessary expenditure. Public opinion, the Commission reported to the Dominions Office, was in favour of government intervention in broadcasting.⁵⁷ Despite lacking permission to establish

53 *Daily News* (St. John's), 7 January 1938, in RG41, vol. 405, file 23-1-7 (pt. 2), NAC.

54 In April 1932, C.L. Parkins of the Imperial Manufacturing Company began broadcasting their advertisements and those of the Royal Stores on VOKW, a station that lasted for more than a year. See Ernest Ash, "The Story of Radio in Newfoundland", in J.R. Smallwood, ed., *The Book of Newfoundland Vol. 1* (St John's, 1937), p. 348.

55 *Daily News*, 7 January 1938.

56 J.H. Penson to Commission of Government, 3 November 1937, pp. 4-8.

57 Governor to Secretary of State for Dominions Affairs, 12 November 1937, p. 7, Microfilm Reel B-5018, DO 35/738/N118/8, NAC.

a public station, the Commission also pressed forward on negotiations with the Dominion Broadcasting Company for the transfer of property. That company reported not having made a profit in the past, but believed that, as of 1937, it was in a position to start recuperating its operating capital. It was willing to sell its assets to the government for \$10,000. This figure was considerably less than its liabilities (\$5,800 to the Canadian Marconi Company) and the initial investment of \$7,541 by R.J. Murphy himself and a further \$13,377 invested by Avalon Telephone Company (of which Murphy was part owner). The Dominion Broadcasting Company was likely willing to sell its assets for less than its original investment since Murphy hoped to exact a promise from the Commission to extend the contract of his Avalon Telephone Company to new areas, and into the future beyond the year 1977. Murphy was prepared to give up a marginal company in exchange for an enhanced position for his already profitable company. The Commission was unwilling to promise anything to Murphy at this stage, but thought that this matter could be resolved if the decision to purchase the station was made. Unfortunately for the Commission, it failed to negotiate a purchasing agreement with the other commercial broadcaster, the Colonial Broadcasting Company (VOCM) owned by Walter Williams and Joseph Butler.⁵⁸

By November 1937 the Commission advocated a proposal similar to that of the Graves Report. The Newfoundland Broadcasting Commission, later renamed the Broadcasting Corporation of Newfoundland (BCN), was to be autonomous of partisan control but remain under the ultimate control of the Commission. The transmitter owned by the Dominion Broadcasting Company, as well as the Mount Pearl Wireless masts which had originally been erected by the British Admiralty, would be bought. The government hoped to purchase a 10,000 watt transmitter, later to be upgraded to 12,500 watts if necessary. That it proposed to spend approximately \$100,000 to establish the station in spite of the Commission's strenuous efforts to cut costs and balance the government's budget suggests the importance the government attributed to public broadcasting.⁵⁹ Under this proposal, the board of Governors of the BCN would consist of people nominated by the government, two of whom would represent the outports, and three St. John's. The sixth member would be the Secretary of Posts and Telegraphs, and that department would remain responsible for the regulation of the technical aspects of the industry.⁶⁰

As in Canada, the creation of a state-owned network did not mean that commercial radio would come to an end. The two church-operated stations, VOWR and VOAR, would be allowed to continue, and the Commission hoped that, left alone, VOCM would die. The Commission would have liked to shut that station

58 G.D. Fraser to Commissioner of Finance, 4 August 1937, Galgay Papers, Coll. 107, file 58, Centre for Newfoundland Studies Archives [CNS(A)].

59 For financial details of the proposed broadcasting corporation see Jeff A. Webb "The Invention of Radio Broadcasting in Newfoundland and the Maritime Provinces, 1922-1939", PhD thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1995, pp. 169-229.

60 Governor to Secretary of State for Dominions Affairs, 12 November 1937, pp. 9-10, Microfilm Reel B-5018, DO 35/738/N118/8, NAC.

down, but decided against such action since, in Newfoundland Governor Humphrey Walwyn's view, "in Newfoundland forcible suppression of private enterprise is always regarded with jealousy".⁶¹ The Commission also outlined possible programme guidelines for its new station that indicate it did not intend to ban advertising on public radio. Limited advertising would be allowed in the form of sponsored programmes, but spot announcements would be eliminated.⁶² It also hoped to phase out "mechanical" music, and to rebroadcast suitable programmes from other countries. Yet the government did not intend to use only imported programming; it hoped to encourage local production as well:

It is hoped that throughout it may be possible to maintain a broadcast program of a character distinctive of the country. A certain amount of local talent, musical and otherwise, is available and it is hoped that this may be utilised from the start.⁶³

That not all the programming would be imported did not mean that the local production would be a reflection of the broad spectrum of Newfoundland culture. The "local talent" used on the air would conform to an international elite culture standard.

Aside from any cultural production, the Commission intended the station to be a tool to aid the government in its efforts to promote the reconstruction of Newfoundland. As Governor Walwyn explained, the principal reason for the station was "the assistance it will give to the government in disseminating information and announcing and explaining its policy at different times".⁶⁴ Radio, in the government's view, could be a positive tool to promote economic development and a vehicle for fostering public support. This was not entirely new. The Commission had already used the existing VONF, as limited as its coverage of the population was, to fight back against critics. The most notable example was the series of broadcasts in which the Commissioners defended themselves against criticism over the "Gander Deal" whereby the chance for a third paper mill on the island had been relinquished.⁶⁵ The BCN would, in short, be a tool to reform Newfoundland's economy and society through publicity and education. As Walwyn argued:

Indeed, the task of government in this country is at present materially hampered by the lack of any sure means of addressing the population at large. It is expected that a Central Station covering the whole country will be especially valuable in connection to the programme of Rural Reconstruction, the health programme, and other schemes of development

61 Governor to Secretary of State for Dominions Affairs, 12 November 1937, p. 13.

62 See "Broadcasting Corporation of Newfoundland Conditions of Broadcasting Advertising Programmes", RG41, vol. 405, file 23-1-7 (pt. 2), NAC.

63 Governor to Secretary of State for Dominions Affairs, 12 November 1937, p. 14.

64 Governor to Secretary of State for Dominions Affairs, 12 November 1937, p. 14.

65 Neary, *Newfoundland in the North Atlantic World*, pp. 91-94.

which the Government has in mind. Similarly, it is felt that a station of the kind contemplated will be of particular value from an educational point of view, not only as being of assistance to schools, but also of a general cultural point of view.⁶⁶

Not everyone on the Commission was so hopeful about the prospects for local broadcasting. Wilfrid Woods, a colonial administrator who succeeded Lodge as the Commissioner of Public Utilities, argued that the Commission already had its hands full and should not proceed to create new areas of controversy. If the Commission were to become responsible for the station, it would receive the blame for any weaknesses in the programming, and the censorship regulations that it would have to impose could also raise objections. Despite these reservations, Woods was willing to go along with the plan, particularly since the public consultation process of the Commission had raised local enthusiasm for the new station to the point that it was not practical to delay. Woods now felt that the question was:

how to get this new station established on the least dangerous basis, i.e. on a basis on which government responsibility would be confined to a minimum. From this standpoint the greater the measure of independence that could be given to the Broadcasting Commission the better.⁶⁷

Concern over the relationship between the government, the broadcaster and the people was to dominate the debate on the shape that the new station was to take.

While the Dominions Office consulted the Treasury and the BBC about the new proposals, the Commission pressed for a quick decision, arguing that, without having made a statement on policy, it was wary of collecting the new year's license fees which were now due.⁶⁸ In London, reservations about the feasibility of a Newfoundland broadcasting system continued. Officials from the BBC and Treasury believed that the financial scheme was overly optimistic, and worried about the other contentious issue, the measure of government control over the programming. They discussed possible means of "preventing broadcast talks or speeches by undesirable persons or the use of the services by ex-politicians and others for the purpose of criticising the government and stirring up political agitation".⁶⁹ Waterfield of the Treasury suggested adopting censorship regulations, and giving the Commission's representative on the BCN's board the power to defer a speaker until the Commission itself had conferred on the matter. Machtig urged

66 Governor to Secretary of State for Dominions Affairs, 12 November 1937, p. 14.

67 Minutes of DO meeting with Wilfrid Woods, 6 January 1938, pp. 2-3, Microfilm Reel B-5018, DO 35/738/N118/9, NAC.

68 Governor to Secretary of State for Dominions Affairs, 15 January 1938, pp. 28-9, Microfilm Reel B-5018, DO 35/738/N118/10, NAC.

69 Minutes of Meeting at DO, 2 February 1938, p. 13, Microfilm Reel B-5018, DO 35/738/N118/10, NAC.

caution in light of both opposition to censorship in Newfoundland and the embarrassment that might arise in Parliament. In the end, they agreed to defer any decisions, and their concerns were to be forwarded to the Commission.⁷⁰ The Commission responded with confident assertions that its plan was practical. The Commissioners thought that the regulations on broadcasting controversial matters contained in the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation Act could be adopted in Newfoundland. More specifically, the Commission believed it would “be necessary to require as a definite rule that speakers should refrain from broadcasting speeches on matters of religious or industrial controversy”, but maintained that it did not intend “to confine the use of the service on subjects of public or political interest alone”.⁷¹

The Dominions Office was convinced that a public broadcasting station should be created, but it remained concerned about how best to ensure government control over the corporation.⁷² In a revealing memo, Clutterbuck argued that basing the censorship regulations of the Newfoundland broadcaster on those of the CBC would be an error since the constitutional regime in Newfoundland was not analogous to that of Canada.

It seems to us that in approaching the question of how far free discussion can be allowed, it is essential to keep in mind the fact that Newfoundland is equipped for the time being with an “emergency” form of government which is not elected by and not directly responsible to the people; which has a definite job to do, a job that cannot be done satisfactorily without treading on a number of corns on the one hand and, on the other hand, retaining the confidence and co-operation of at any rate the majority of the people; and which, therefore, not merely presents an easy target for attack from interested quarters but is also more vulnerable than an elected Government to such attacks.⁷³

The Dominions Office feared that the Commissioners might find themselves in a position of having constantly to defend themselves in the media. The Whitehall mandarins assumed that any criticism of the form of government would automatically be ruled out as a subject for on-air discussion, and public comment would be restricted to matters of government policy. But allowing some limited criticism might help the Commission administer the country. The Commission had suggested that allowing broadcasts on controversial matters would give the government a better knowledge of the “extent and range of any opposition to the government” and thus allow an opportunity to counter this dissent.⁷⁴ Yet

70 Minutes of Meeting at DO, 2 February 1938, p. 13.

71 Governor to Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, 2 April 1938, p. 74, 77,81, Microfilm Reel B-5018, DO 35/738/N118/17, NAC.

72 DO to Governor, 6 May 1938, p. 66, Microfilm Reel B-5018, DO 35/738/N118/17, NAC.

73 Clutterbuck to Penson, 9 June 1938, pp. 23-24, Microfilm Reel B-5018, DO 35/738/N118/17, NAC.

74 Clutterbuck to Penson, 9 June 1938, p. 24.

Clutterbuck pointed out that there were still dangers inherent in even this limited degree of freedom of speech:

But would not this give ample scope to Sir Richard Squires and his friends, with the whole Newfoundland audience before them, to belittle the Commission's work and undermine their hold on the country? One can imagine that he would be adept at smooth phrases which would meet all reasonable censorship requirements but might none the less have a very damaging effect among the ignorant and uneducated.⁷⁵

The former Newfoundland Prime Minister, Richard Squires, had opposed the Commission since its inception and was a man whom the Commission feared might lead a popular revolt.⁷⁶ Furthermore, prohibiting citizens from speaking on national affairs on the public station posed its own dangers. It would be difficult, the Dominions Office thought, to refuse to broadcast speeches by prominent Newfoundlanders such as Squires. It feared these people might then criticize the Commission for stifling their access to the publicly owned station.⁷⁷ This concern was far from paranoia, and it was not long after VONF was taken over that the Commission found itself facing criticism on exactly these grounds. In the midst of a dispute between two rival unions, Fisherman's Protective Union President, Kenneth Brown, was denied access to the government station. Brown went to the privately owned VOXM and broadcast an attack upon the "dictatorship" for using VONF as a propaganda tool.⁷⁸

The Commission hoped to defuse possible accusations that it was foisting a government-owned station on the public. It tried to persuade the public that the station came from Newfoundlanders themselves by appointing a committee of private citizens to draft a broadcasting act. The committee consisted of men the Commission believed it could trust, including the conservative and eminently respectable editor of the *Daily News*, J.S. Currie, the lawyers C.E. Hunt and T.H. O'Neill, and local businessman, George R. Williams. The government also had three representatives on the committee, G.D. Frazer, Commissioner Penson and Commissioner of Justice L.E. Emerson. Penson hoped that Newfoundlanders would not think that the committee's recommendations had been dictated by the Commission since the majority of the members of the committee were not members of the Commission, and all but himself were Newfoundlanders.⁷⁹ The committee met between 18 July and 2 September 1938, and used the Charter of the British Broadcasting Corporation and the Canadian Broadcasting Act of 1936 as general

75 Clutterbuck to Penson, 9 June 1938, pp. 24-25.

76 Webb, "Newfoundland's National Convention", pp. 13-16.

77 Clutterbuck to Penson, 9 June 1938, p. 25.

78 Speech of Kenneth Brown, 29 April 1939, Disc DC210B, Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive.

79 Penson to Clutterbuck, 15 November 1938, pp. 3-6, Microfilm Reel B-5018, DO 35/738/N118/26, NAC.

models in drafting their own legislation.⁸⁰ Newfoundland governments often examined acts of other legislatures when designing their own legislation, and it would be an error to see the BCN as a copy of another network.

The Newfoundland Broadcasting Act, proclaimed on 27 January 1939, established the BCN with a form that assured an arms-length distance from the government so that the Commission not receive the blame for programming decisions, but yet retain ultimate control.⁸¹ The Commission appointed a board of six governors whose taste and discretion could be counted upon. It named George R. Williams as the Chairman, and the other members included J.S. Currie, the lawyers Charles Hunt and Robert S. Furlong (who served as Secretary), Lorenzo Moore, William H. Abbott and G.D. Frazer, as the Government's representative.⁸² These men all had public service and education credentials and could be counted upon to be "responsible". Williams was involved in many charities, including the military-style Church Lads Brigade. A former President of the Board of Trade, he had also chaired the Newfoundland Broadcasting Committee of VOWR. Currie had been a former member of the Legislative Council. Hunt was involved in many public service activities, including being a director of the Church of England College and a former member of the Board of Directors of Memorial College. Furlong involved himself in many clubs and societies associated with St. Bonaventure's College, a Catholic boys' school.⁸³ Abbott was an outport merchant and former member of the House of Assembly, while Moore owned a bakery in Grand Falls.⁸⁴ Not only were these governors appointed by and responsible to the Commission, but to ensure control the Commissioner of Finance retained the power to compel the BCN to broadcast or refrain from broadcasting any matter at any time. The Commissioner of Finance was also responsible for financial supervision of the BCN, and had to approve any large expenditures.⁸⁵

The Amulree Report gave the Commission a mandate to prepare the people for a return to self-government. While it recommended many schemes for economic development, the report was mute on the question of how to achieve the political re-education of Newfoundlanders. Given the nature of Newfoundland's small and scattered population, and low levels of literacy, it is not surprising that the government turned its attention to radio broadcasting. The Commission realized that broadcasting could be a powerful educational tool, not just in the sense of teaching academic subjects or new skills, but also in initiating a cultural change that would make the population self-reliant. The importance of this cultural project in the minds of the Commissioners cannot be stressed enough. The state tried to

80 Clutterbuck to MacGregor, BBC, 7 December 1938, p. 8, Microfilm Reel B-5018, DO 35/738/N118/27, NAC. The minutes of the meetings of the Committee and a draft copy of "An Act Respecting Broadcasting" can be found in RG 41, vol. 405, file 23-1-7 (pt. 2), NAC.

81 Newfoundland Broadcasting Act (1938), p. 14, Microfilm Reel B-5018, DO 35/738/N118/40, NAC.

82 G.D. Frazer to J.S. MacGregor (BBC), 17 July 1939, Coll. 107, Galgay Papers, file 63, CNS(A).

83 Penson to Commission, 12 January 1939, GN 38, S5-1-5, file 10, PANL.

84 Penson to Commission, 4 March 1939, GN 38, S5-1-5, file 10, PANL.

85 Newfoundland Broadcasting Act (1938), pp. 16-19.

trim every cent from its expenditure in an effort to return solvency to government finances, but it financed ventures that it believed could contribute to reconstruction of the economy. The BCN was one such venture, an expensive vehicle to bring entertainment and education to Newfoundlanders.

While the creation of public broadcasting was a step in the reconstruction of the Newfoundland economy, it was also a defensive move on the part of a non-elected government that increasingly feared its loss of public support. The Commissioners thought that broadcasting could provide the means to publicize their efforts, and, as the Depression wore on, they felt a greater need to bolster their flagging public support. The Commission and the Dominions Office also worried that allowing their critics access to the air would hand the opposition a tool which could be used to organize a popular revolt against the government. Yet the Commission thought that if it were to muzzle criticism entirely, radio could not be used to provide a measure of public opinion. The Commission lacked elected representatives to provide it with information on the effectiveness of its measures to reconstruct the society and the degree to which the public supported its policies. Furthermore, if it were to block the expression of alternative viewpoints on the people's station then it would be vulnerable to charges that it was out of touch with the country. Members of the British Parliament might ask embarrassing questions about whether the Dominions Office was operating a propaganda machine in Newfoundland. Many of the motivations that led to public broadcasting in Newfoundland were similar to those in Britain and Canada, such as the belief among public officials that the commercial dynamic of privately-owned radio discouraged quality broadcasting. As Clutterbuck had emphasized, however, Newfoundland's constitutional status was not analogous to that of Canada. Therefore, the non-democratic nature of the regime proved to have a profound influence on its broadcasting policy.