

‘needful supervision’: Talks and taste on early Canadian radio

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Abstract

Thanks to the commercial potential of musical programming, serial dramas, and comedies, developing talk radio essentially fell to public broadcasting bodies: the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission (CRBC) and its successor the CBC. Although talks were only a small part of the broadcast schedule by the end of the war, this was the period during which public broadcasters made such programming an identifiable and indelible part of their activities. After its creation in 1937, the CBC’s Talks Department served essentially the same function as the opinion or hobby pages of a newspaper, yet unlike those pages, talks remained largely unsponsored.

The Story

Winston Curry’s *Sweet Hour of Prayer* went missing from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) schedule one evening in 1942, and listener Roy Campbell of Montreal grumbled to the Corporation’s Programme Department: “I tuned in to catch this refreshing broadcast only to find a lady discussing cheese.”¹ In contrast to the embrace given to programmes like Curry’s and to more mainstream entertainment from the 1930s through the Second World War, neither commercial stations nor public broadcasters in Canada were clamouring to schedule topical talks on cheese, or anything else.

Thanks to the commercial potential of musical programming, serial dramas, and comedies, the task of developing talks fell to public broadcasting bodies: the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission (CRBC) and its successor the CBC. Although talks only grew to occupy about six per cent of the broadcast schedule by the end of the war, this

¹ Roy D. Campbell to Programme Director, n.d. [1942]. Library and Archives Canada, Winston Curry Papers, MG 30 C 185, Vol. 1, file 1, Correspondence 1942-70.

was the period during which public broadcasters made such programming an identifiable and indelible part of their activities.² After its creation in 1937, the CBC's Talks Department served essentially the same function as the opinion or hobby pages of a newspaper, yet unlike those pages, talks remained largely unsponsored. This meant that on the CBC, the content of talks and the speakers' performances were not reflections of sponsors' interests or prejudices, but of the Corporation's stewardship over topics and personalities on the air. Their aim in trying to control the substance of talks broadcasts and the speakers involved was to ensure that Canadian radio became synonymous with 'tasteful' fare by bringing talks to listeners without sowing unwarranted controversy, pandering to fads, or indulging too often in emotional appeals.

Scholars of Canadian radio have delved into religious programming, the potentially inflammatory messages carried at election time, or those bellowed out by special pleaders.³ Actuality broadcasts, women's programming and documentaries have also rated some attention.⁴ We owe some more to spoken word essays, commentary on local, national, and international affairs, and lighter informational programmes. As a

² "Nature of Sustaining and Commercial Programs, Year Ending March 31st 1945." Library and Archives Canada, Records of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Vol. 288, file 14-1-12, Part 1, Reports & Memoranda for Parliamentary Committee, 1946.

³ Len Kuffert, "Tempest in the Tea Leaves: Broadcasting the esoteric arts and mystic sciences, 1937-53," *Canadian Historical Review* 91(1) (March 2010) 1-26; Russell Johnston, "The Early Trials of Protestant Radio, 1922-38," *Canadian Historical Review* 75(3) (September 1994): 376-402; Ian Ward, "The Early Use of Radio For Political Communication in Australia and Canada: John Henry Austral, Mr. Sage and the Man From Mars," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 45(3) (1999): 311-329; Michael Nolan, "Canadian Election Broadcasting: Political Practices and Radio Regulation 1919-1939," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 29(2) (1985): 175-188; See the chapter on radio in: James Penton, *Jehovah's Witnesses in Canada: Champions of Freedom of Speech* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976).

⁴ Anne F. MacLennan, "Women, Radio Broadcasting and the Depression: A "Captive" Audience from Household Hints to Story Time and Serials," *Women's Studies* 37(6) (2008): 616-633; David Hogarth, "The Other Documentary Tradition: early radio documentaries in Canada," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 21(2) (2001): 123-135; Jeff A. Webb, "Canada's Moose River Mine Disaster (1936): radio-newspaper competition in the business of news," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 16(3) (1996): 424-444.

result of commercial stations' uneven record-keeping, the bulk of the archival evidence surrounding this phase of radio's development in Canada comes to us via the CBC. Still, sponsors' reluctance to underwrite talks programming on a consistent basis over the commercial airwaves is plain enough when we see it reflected in the records we have. Radio critics commenting on the state of talks understood that the constraints of commercial broadcasting, coupled with what Robert Mallory later called the "pecuniary mind," prevented private stations from establishing talks as a regular element in their schedules.⁵ Inheriting the job of providing talks of interest to the greatest number of listeners led CBC programme producers to experiment with scheduling and subjects and, perhaps more importantly, led them to develop a style of *managing* how and by whom opinion and expertise were disseminated. Popular bandleaders played musical numbers, and those did not require oversight. But a scarcity (real or perceived) of good (genial, entertaining, engaging) speakers in Canada meant that talks producers struggled to retain the acceptable speakers they had, and to cultivate new ones. Producers had to bear in mind both what listeners might want and what they believed listeners should hear, seeking voices that were simultaneously friendly and authoritative to bridge that gap in tastes.

An early touchstone for Canadian talks practise *could* have been the experience of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), which abandoned its policy of dodging

⁵ Robert Mallory, "Canadian Radio," *Canadian Forum* XXXIV No. 406 (November 1954): 181-182; House of Commons Special Committee on Radio Broadcasting, "Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence, No. 5," 28-29 May 1942, Witness: Gladstone Murray. (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1942). In her definitive *Listening In: The First Decade of Canadian Broadcasting, 1922-1932* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992) Mary Vipond gives a few examples of talks over private stations, but notes that this material was considered to be a kind of 'filler.' *Listening In*, 95.

controversial content during the 1926 UK General Strike. As BBC Director General John Reith declared shortly after the strike, radio was “bound to take”⁶ a leadership role in reporting and commenting on such events. The BBC could not, however, editorialize or be seen to be reporting only one side of an issue.⁷ Although Canadian broadcasters were aware of BBC practices, the inchoate Canadian radio ‘system’ in the later 1920s made imitation difficult. Along with an ocean of amateur broadcasting licence holders, Canada’s private broadcasters, some universities, as well as the small-scale Canadian National Railways (CNR) and Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) networks rounded out the nation’s broadcasting outlets at that time. Newspapers, some of which had invested in broadcasting, retained control over news commentary.⁸ According to surviving scripts, mid-1920s talks over CNR airwaves tended to be tourism-focused, encouraging travel and even immigration to Canada.⁹ During the Royal Commission on Radio Broadcasting, begun at the close of the decade, one witness suggested that announcers on Canadian stations should be certified to “speak clearly, grammatically and with a cultured voice in either, or both of the official languages,” but that this proposed regulation need not apply to “prominent men giving talks on subjects of public interest.”¹⁰ Early in the Canadian radio era, the voices listeners were hearing most often were those of the stations’ own personnel, and much less frequently those of experts or public figures. Hopes that radio could be ‘redeemed’ also punctuated this period. Reporting for the *Baltimore Sun* on the

⁶ Reith to Secretary of GPO, 27 May 1926. BBC Written Archives Centre, R34/317/1, Policy, Controversial Broadcasting, File 1A, 1923-1928.

⁷ “Controversy,” [excerpts from Reports and correspondence between BBC and GPO, 1926-1928]. BBC Written Archives Centre, R34/317/1, Policy, Controversial Broadcasting, File 1A, 1923-1928.

⁸ On this early period, see Vipond’s *Listening In*, especially Chapters One and Two.

⁹ Various scripts in E.A. Weir Papers; Press release on CNR radio, 1926. Library and Archives Canada, E.A. Weir Papers, MG 30 D 67, Vol. 19, file 1, C.N.R. – Radio – Miscellaneous Speeches & Articles.

¹⁰ James Buckley to Donald Manson, 7 January 1929. Library and Archives Canada, Records of the Royal Commission on Radio Broadcasting, RG 33-14, Vol. 1, file 227-10-3.

debate about what form Canada's broadcasting system might ultimately take, the paper's correspondent wished that Canadian audiences would be spared the sort of "advertising talks" that American audiences got – "lengthy harangues on the merits of somebody's soap or another's sausages" – and regarding spoken word material, noted only that Canadian stations carefully avoided stirring political or religious conflict.¹¹ English theatre director Tyrone Guthrie, hired to help the CNR radio department create a historical 'pageant of Canada' in 1931, threw in some free advice on talks, conceiving of speakers along the lines of beat reporters, but cautioning that these people should be paid well because "success of the whole venture depends upon them."¹² At the height of the depression, CNR's radio arm undertook no other projects quite as ambitious as its historical dramas, and just as the railway exited the broadcasting field in 1932, the field itself changed abruptly, making the establishment of regular talks programming much more likely.¹³

The triumph of a vision of broadcasting that was nationalist in spirit and semi-nationalized in structure led to the creation of the CRBC in 1932, and talks remained an underdeveloped corner of the new Commission's territory. Mary Vipond has written extensively about this Commission era, and in the case of spoken word material she argues that the CRBC desired to protect free speech but was ready to clamp down on abusive language or cater to popular outrage at, for instance, the radio antics of the

¹¹ James Montagnes, "Canada Plans to Rule Her Ether Waves," *Baltimore Sun*, 16 February 1930, 3.

¹² [Tyrone Guthrie], *Eye-Witness Reports on the Microphone At Large*, n.d. [1931]. Library and Archives Canada, E.A. Weir Papers, MG 30 D 67, Vol. 3, file 6, Tyrone Guthrie.

¹³ CNR staff member Austin Weir reported a series of talks starting up in 1932, but this was short-lived. E. Austin Weir, *The Struggle for National Broadcasting in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1965), 67.

Jehovah’s Witnesses’ less-inhibited members.¹⁴ As far as tamer talks went, Col. W.A. Steel, probably the most curmudgeonly CRBC commissioner, lamented the fact that by 1934, CRBC stations had not managed to make much progress in spoken word material, instead rebroadcasting BBC talks containing “the very thing which is unpopular in Canada, namely, long drawn out talks with no point in them so far as Canada was concerned.”¹⁵ With the advent of the CBC in 1936, the problem of adequate resources to produce talks at home was only partially solved, but at least the new Corporation made its preferences better known regarding what it imported from the BBC. When CBC Programme Director Ernest Bushnell asked his BBC counterpart in 1937 that the “number of solemn talks kept to minimum,”¹⁶ he was placing an order to be filled in the future rather than reacting to already-broadcast material.

Programme producers at the CBC could not be so selective regarding American commentaries, which had been part of Canadians’ listening diet long before the war, and were bound to continue influencing the way that listeners conceived of what was available on radio. A Tillsonburg, Ontario, listener thought Canadian radio had been tainted by “U.S. emotionalism that gets nowhere” and looked to the CBC to clean house.¹⁷ Occasional speaker Elmore Philpott, formerly of the *Toronto Globe*, saw American commentators as “so emotional as to border on the hysterical,” and self-

¹⁴ Mary Vipond, “Censorship in a Liberal State: Regulating Talk on Canadian Radio in the Early 1930s,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 30(1) (March 2010): 75-94.

¹⁵ Steel’s comment was excerpted in a letter from Gladstone Murray to John Reith that included bits “from Canadian Commissioners to friends of mine in Canada, repeated to me for confidential information”. Murray to Reith, 12 March 1934. BBC Written Archives Centre, E1/522/1, Countries: Canada, Empire Broadcasting in Canada, File 1A, 1933-1934.

¹⁶ Felix Greene to J.B. Clark, 4 January 1937. BBC Written Archives Centre, E1/561/1, Countries: Canada, Programme Details, File 1, 1936-1937. By the early post-war period, the BBC’s own representative in Canada was weighing in on which talks the CBC would likely take. Michael Barkway to Rooney Pelletier, 25 November 1947. BBC Written Archives Centre, E1/586/1, Countries: Canada, ‘Wednesday Night,’ File 1A, October 1947 -May 1948.

¹⁷ Mrs H.A. [McKerrall] to CBC, 14 February 1938. Library and Archives Canada, Records of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Vol. 394, file 21-17, Part 1, Complaints re Licence Fee.

interestedly urged the CBC to provide a foil by increasing homegrown commentary.¹⁸

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it seemed easier for producers to consider women’s programming as a thing apart. As CBC Women’s Interest staff member Elizabeth Long wrote to an American colleague at the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), she found during the 1939 Royal Visit that “sincere emotion expressed over the air had universal listener appeal.” Add the urgency of wartime, and talks, at least the ones by and for women, need not be devoid of affect. “Women can be emotional and still keep their dignity;” wrote Long, “also they can present the civilian point of view on Canada’s war effort more fittingly than men in mufti.”¹⁹

The attempts to tread a safe path with respect to the spoken word on Canadian airwaves also applied to the American programming the CBC itself carried. Presidential speeches and greetings would be broadcast in any case, but this courtesy did not extend to more potentially controversial talks. In late 1939, the CBC ended its relaying of one of the more popular American musical programmes, the *Ford Symphony Hour*, because William J. Cameron’s commentary was also part of the show. Cameron, editor of the *Dearborn Independent*, had nearly twenty years earlier helped his employer, Henry Ford, to publicize the infamous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.²⁰ A listener from Montreal asked why the Ford show had disappeared, given the fact that American commentary was still readily available in print, and chalked the CBC’s decision up to an “insatiable desire

¹⁸ Elmore Philpott to Murray, 7 September 1939. Library and Archives Canada, Records of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Vol. 195, file 11-18-11-35-1 (Part 1), Programming - Talks and Public Affairs Broadcasts - Program Speakers and Talks - Elmore Philpott.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Long to Margaret Cuthbert, 23 April 1940. National Broadcasting Company Records, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Box 75, folder 33, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1940.

²⁰ Neil Baldwin, *Henry Ford and the Jews: The Mass Production of Hate* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2002), 265-266.

for making rules.”²¹ CBC General Manager Gladstone Murray tried to forge a compromise with Ford to extend the musical portion of the show or to substitute another less strident speaker, but gave up when Ford’s advertising staff insisted that, in effect, Ford cars were sold by Cameron’s talks, not the music.²²

Despite the example of the Ford show, one of the foundations of talks policy was scheduling talks so as not to interfere with more popular programmes, usually music or comedy. This presupposed that talks would, by default, appeal to smaller, specialized audiences. Talks on topics such as conservation and architecture, for example, were assigned to times outside peak listening periods, or as Talks staffer D.W. Buchanan prosaically put it, “you would have to stay up late if you really wanted to hear that type of programme.”²³ He toured the West in 1937 and reported on talks being produced in centres like Winnipeg, finding the results uneven. Local academics had put on promising series such as “Law and the Public,” as well as the curiously-titled “How to Do Things.”²⁴ Although such talks had to be scheduled gingerly around sponsored material, the CBC’s early ideal, Roy Dunlop explained in 1938 to American network producers, was “getting as many interesting characters and personalities as possible on the air and to cover as widely as we could a variety of human interests, hobbies, occupations, pastimes and

²¹ J.S.B. Macpherson to CBC, 15 November 1939. Library and Archives Canada, Records of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Vol. 238, file 11-34-2, Programming - Programme Cancellations - “Ford Symphony Hour”.

²² Murray to J.S.B. Macpherson, 20 November 1939. Library and Archives Canada, Records of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Vol. 238, file 11-34-2, Programming - Programme Cancellations - “Ford Symphony Hour”.

²³ D.W. Buchanan to Gladstone Murray, 31 May 1938. Library and Archives Canada, Records of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Vol. 165, file 11-2-3 (Part 1), Programming - Talks.

²⁴ “Report by D.W. Buchanan on tour of Western Canada,” July 2nd - August 8th, 1937. Library and Archives Canada, Ernest Bushnell Papers, MG 30 E250, Vol. 1, file 7.

ideas.”²⁵ During the war, ‘talks periods’ were established even more rigidly, and listeners could count on travel and adventure, books or science talks airing at regular times.²⁶ The idea, as Corporation publicity material suggested, was to emulate the benefit that readers of an established newspaper column would get when it appeared in the same section of the paper every edition. Speaking to particular slices of the listening public, “women listeners, children, farmers, etc., whose interests could be met by providing special types of talks,”²⁷ re-created another pattern common in daily and weekly newspapers: columns that addressed groups defined by gender, occupation, or other categories.

Some talks had been ghettoized into less desirable time periods, but more mainstream topics, especially commentary on current affairs, could command better places in the schedule, i.e., closer to the main news bulletins. As part of its talks policy, the public broadcaster saw the need to monitor and shape the content of news commentaries so that the views of demagogues on the left or right would not offend listeners. At the time of the Munich Conference in 1938, one of the CBC’s more experienced commentators, Dalhousie University’s H.L. Stewart, discussed with Buchanan the subjects for a new series of talks on world affairs, and affirmed that these talks must be carefully overseen, especially in a time of international tension. “It seems to me wholly possible,” Stewart wrote, “to set up such needful supervision while preserving the exercise ... of free criticism within these somewhat ample bounds.”²⁸ The bounds

²⁵ Roy Dunlop, “Report from Hollywood,” September 1938. Library and Archives Canada, Roy Dunlop Papers, MG 30 D349, Vol. 1.

²⁶ Elspeth Chisholm to Hugh Morrison, 29 April 1943. Library and Archives Canada, Records of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Vol. 165, file 11-2-3 (Part 1), Programming - Talks.

²⁷ “Talks,” Number Five in the Series *Five Years of Achievement, 1936-1941*, (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1941), 2.

²⁸ H.L. Stewart to D.W. Buchanan, 4 October 1938. Library and Archives Canada, Records of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Vol. 185, file 11-18-4 (part 1), Programming - Talks and Public Affairs Broadcasts - National Forum.

here were ideological, and the CBC had recognized by wartime that it faced a choice between straight factual presentation without an editorial stance, or a freer system with an attempt at balance between commentators of quality.²⁹

Promotional material from the Talks Department in 1938-39 suggests that the CBC kept its promise to present a broad range of talks, from commentaries on current affairs to some of the more special interest material, like a monthly feature on aviation, and series like “Science at Work.”³⁰ The desire to reach out to listeners with particular interests reflected the CBC’s public service image of itself. That is, the Corporation put on such programmes precisely because the limited number of listeners who might like to hear speakers like Dr C.A. Chant talking about astronomy would not be likely to hear them except over low power university stations. Not however, broadcasting would be to deny the possibility that new interests or tastes could be kindled. Talks service to the regions further illustrated this view. Especially before the CBC had been able to initiate more effective coverage of the prairies, staff supposed that Western audiences were especially eager to hear talks, given the “remoteness of the Western listener from large centres, and his lack of opportunity to hear speakers at meetings etc.” The fact that talks were often scheduled with central and eastern Canadian audiences in mind meant that even the CBC’s Winnipeg station would not carry some of them if it meant ditching a popular local show.³¹

²⁹ “Programme Policy Statement No. 1,” 12 April 1944. Library and Archives Canada, Records of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Vol. 164, file 11-2 (Part 1), Programmes Policy - General.

³⁰ “Broadcast Talks, February-April 1938”; “Broadcast Talks, Autumn-Winter 1938”; “Broadcast Talks in Canada, Winter-Spring 1939,” Library and Archives Canada, Records of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Vol. 275, file 11-42-8, Programming - Educational Broadcasts - Adult Education - General.

³¹ D.W. Buchanan to Gladstone Murray, 21 October 1937. Library and Archives Canada, Records of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Vol. 165, file 11-2-3 (Part 1), Programming - Talks.

Another trend in talks production at the CBC was the admission that as well as serving minority tastes, the CBC set out to cultivate what it considered to be ‘intelligent’ listeners, listeners who might not be fascinated by a particular subject, but would give it a chance, listeners curious enough to adapt to a programme that did not immediately stoke their pleasure centres. Arthur Phelps, who taught English at United College in Winnipeg, was a regular speaker and an advocate for this approach to talks. In 1943, he eagerly passed on a listener’s letter condemning the dominant trend, which his correspondent labelled “wise-cracking and hiding our heads in the sand.”³² Another such letter prompted him to write to General Manager J.S. Thomson that not only should the CBC push on down the path of programming for the intelligent listener, but there was “a public hungry” for a sophisticated approach to talks, and it was the CBC’s job to expand this audience.³³ Planned listening, as opposed to browsing on the radio dial, appeared to be a habit of the intelligent listener, and in promoting a publication to let listeners know more reliably when certain programmes were airing, the CBC hoped to increase not only the number of listeners, but to make it more convenient for the broader public to behave as discriminating listeners were presumably already doing.³⁴ Private stations augmenting their own schedules with a partial feed from the CBC found themselves carrying what must have seemed like deathly dull stuff, especially when the preceding programme had been a big-budget import. With their own balance sheets and local reputations squarely in view, private stations could neither afford nor countenance providing much airtime at all

³² G.W. Guest to Phelps, 31 March 1943. Library and Archives Canada, Records of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Vol. 194, file 11-18-11-9 (Part 1), Programming - Talks and Public Affairs Broadcasts - Program Speakers and Talks - Arthur Phelps.

³³ Phelps to J.S. Thomson, 8 March 1943. Library and Archives Canada, Records of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Vol. 194, file 11-18-11-9 (Part 1), Programming - Talks and Public Affairs Broadcasts - Program Speakers and Talks - Arthur Phelps.

³⁴ Report on CBC National Programme Publication [1943]. Library and Archives Canada, E.A. Weir Papers, MG 30 D 67, Vol. 13, file 5, C.B.C. – Proposed Radio Publication.

for amateurs, hobbyists and professors going on about their own corners of the world. In 1941, even though war news had curtailed the frequency of talks over the CBC, the private station owners’ group, the Canadian Association of Broadcasters, complained to Gladstone Murray that too many talks were scheduled.³⁵

Speakers like Stewart and Phelps, already experts in their own fields and drawn into radio when the CBC was filling its stable of speakers, remained talks attractions into and throughout wartime. As one listener put it in 1938: “As far as I am personally concerned I pay a license fee to hear Dr. H.L. Stewart and Mr. Ferguson of Winnipeg review the news and also to hear the Hart House String Quartette.”³⁶ However, the output of the best talkers was limited, and CBC efforts to recruit new speakers for regional and national programming focussed on the elusive mix of clarity, authority, and the ability to seem detached. As Ernest Bushnell said of a couple of prospects: “I am not so sure about Jamieson, although I have never heard him over the air he has quite a Scotch accent and I am told cribs most of his stuff from the work of outstanding critics. I think we are going to stir up a hornets’ nest if we have very much to do with Tom McInnes. I do not think he can broadcast an uncontroversial series. It is not his nature.”³⁷ When Gladstone Murray determined that longtime public broadcasting activist Graham Spry’s efforts at the microphone were the sort of thing that the CBC could use, he telegraphed Spry: “Talks excellent stop Please try groom deputies replace you similar vein and attitude when you

³⁵ “Summary of the Views Presented by the Canadian Association of Broadcasters at a Meeting on December 17th with the General Manager of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation,” (1941). Library and Archives Canada, Records of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Vol. 342, file 15-3, Part 2.

³⁶ H.H. Murphy M.D. to Department of Transport, 14 February 1938. Library and Archives Canada, Records of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Vol. 394, file 21-17, Part 1, Complaints re Licence Fee.

³⁷ E.L. Bushnell to Gladstone Murray, 16 August 1937. Library and Archives Canada, Ernest Bushnell Papers, MG 30 E250, Vol. 1, file 7.

happen be absent.”³⁸ Apparently, those who had the right sort of voice would be able to judge it in others.

Talks had become another conduit for conveying the message of national co-operation and dedication to the war effort. Reporting in 1941 on the Corporation’s first five years in operation, a commemorative CBC publication asserted that Canadians liked

to hear men and women of outstanding reputation and achievement, speak to them in the personal, intimate way that broadcasting makes possible. Looked at in this light, the talk becomes something more than entertainment; it becomes an important source of information and a medium of communication between the leaders of the nation – in thought and in action – and the rank and file of the community.”³⁹

The rank and file, however, would not be browbeaten, even in wartime, and the Corporation’s decision-makers also recognized this. Rowe Holland, a new member of the CBC Board of Governors in 1943, addressed the problem of occasional speaker Willson Woodside’s blustery manner by appealing to Woodside’s desire to remain sympathetic to his listeners and hence influential. Holland told Bushnell: “the listening public resent being lectured and dislike being “pronunciamento’d”. If it be merely suggested to him that he is losing his public as a consequence, his adaptable intelligence will be brought to bear.”⁴⁰ Rather than casting about for and training new speakers, producers could appeal to Woodside to stay within the bounds of a moderate style.

Despite some pessimistic assessments of the talent pool, the search for talks personalities intensified as the war began, expanding to accommodate some transplanted

³⁸ Gladstone Murray to Graham Spry, telegram, [February 1939]. Library and Archives Canada, Graham Spry Papers, MG 30 D 297, Vol. 65, file 31, Copies of correspondence; explanatory notes relating to Spry’s experience with the B.B.C. as a commentator.

³⁹ “Talks,” Number Five in the Series *Five Years of Achievement, 1936-1941*, (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1941)

⁴⁰ R. Rowe Holland to Ernest Bushnell, 6 October 1943. Library and Archives Canada, Ernest Bushnell Papers, MG 30 E250, Vol. 1, file 19, CBC Issues 1943.

speakers and then contracting as more Canadians could be tapped to go on the air. Elmore Philpott reminded CBC personnel that Canadian voices could provide a valuable service: "As the war proceeds it would seem to me to be absolutely essential to have more news background broadcasts. I have heard [Americans] Gunther, Dorothy Thompson, Gram Swing and other interpreters of war developments, all editorializing with freedom during the past week and all I believe over C.B.C."⁴¹ Taking too many talks from American commentators, especially while the US was neutral, was a situation that needed rectifying, and Americans were not the only ones affected. Irish playwright John Coulter found an occasional home on the CBC for his rambling dissections of literature, theatre and radio fare, but only until 1943. Despairing that the listening public had been deprived of his badly-needed cosmopolitanism, he wondered if the Corporation's desire to use more authentically Canadian voices was "going to be adequate excuse for the C.B.C's Talks Department on the Judgement Day."⁴²

Music still ruled the roost in 1941, taking up about 51% of the broadcast day, but by March 1945, the wartime surge of spoken word programming was complete, as it accounted for slightly more time than music on CBC stations. Among spoken word programmes, drama took up more time than news reports, with talks running third.⁴³ Yet, quantity was only part of the story. That same year, the BBC's chief representative in Canada, Michael Barkway, could report to his superiors that "there is one class of

⁴¹ Elmore Philpott to Murray, 7 September 1939. Library and Archives Canada, Records of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Vol. 195, file 11-18-11-35-1 (Part 1), Programming - Talks and Public Affairs Broadcasts - Program Speakers and Talks - Elmore Philpott.

⁴² John Coulter to Elspeth Chisholm, 4 April 1945. McMaster University Archives, John Coulter Papers, Box 2, Correspondence CBC Toronto, 1939-1979.

⁴³ "Music," Number Seven in the Series *Five Years of Achievement, 1936-1941*, (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1941); Nature of Sustaining and Commercial Programs, Year Ending March 31st 1945. Library and Archives Canada, Records of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Vol. 288, file 14-1-12, Part 1, Reports & Memoranda for Parliamentary Committee 1946.

programme which Canada can produce in satisfactory quantity and with high quality; and that is talks and commentaries.” He recommended enlisting some of this Canadian talent to produce monthly Dominion commentaries for broadcast on the BBC’s Home Service.⁴⁴ This, too, was a far cry from just a few years earlier, when CBC talks producers agonized over what Canadian talks should try to do, and wondered if there would ever be enough decent speakers. The whole enterprise illustrated the core difference of opinion about Canadian radio audiences, with one camp convinced that promoting variety and sophistication in talks would meet an unspoken need, and the other content to produce very little of this sort of programming at all because sponsors would not back its production. The methods of recruiting speakers and vetting talks developed between about 1936 and 1945 also reflected public broadcasters’ hopeful attitude toward listeners’ tastes and toward listeners’ ability to welcome (or withstand) episodic and informal education via the new technology of radio.

⁴⁴ Michael Barkway to J.B. Clark, 12 October 1945. BBC Written Archives Centre, E1/509/1, File 1, Countries: Canada, Canadian Representative, 1943-1944.