

TWUC AGM 2000

Last June in Toronto I attended my umpteenth AGM of The Writers Union of Canada. I've seen the Union from all angles - from my giddy days as a newborn book writer (when non-fiction was still broadly regarded as *declassé*) through years of being an Alberta rep to the National Council, a "floating" rep, a Veep and, finally, portentously, a Chair (1993-94), to today's Union of more than 1300 writers who have to deal more than ever with firestorms domestic and international (think: Chapters/Indigo, think: World Trade Organization) - and I can't imagine my life as a writer without it.

Of course there are the bread and butter services the Union provides that go a long way to reduce the severity of a writer's solitude - contract advice, readings bookings, grievance negotiations, regional representation - and the lobbying for improved economic (if not social) status: the dogged meetings year in and year out with Canada Council, Heritage, stumping for Public Lending Right (the Union-initiated program that compensates writers for books held in libraries), CanCopy (the folks who send out the cheques to copyright holders for photocopied material), Arts and Cultural Industries Promotion in the Department of Foreign Affairs, the Book and Periodical Council, the libraries and ministries of education and Freedom of Expression Committees, our very own newly-minted Creators' Rights Alliance....

And this is only the half of it. The other half of The Writers Union of Canada's *raison d'être* is big-P politics.

Although there have always been members to decry the Union's lamentable engagement with sordid "politics," arguing that artists' organizations exist to serve the professional needs of their members, period, this view has never prevailed, thank goodness. (Even in lowkey years we are merely resting in the calm between storms.) It is a peculiarly North American diffidence, this shyness among artists about taking collective public stands on issues agitating civil society. Think how much we honour and cherish the "politics" of writers such as Vaclav Havel, Nadine Gordimer, Eduardo Galeano, Pramodya Ananta Toer and Mahmud Darwish, and how much we support, through PEN and Amnesty International, collective efforts to succor fellow writers who fall foul of the lawless.

So I am proud to say that over the years that I have been attending AGMs of the Writers Union of Canada, I have witnessed and participated in heated and impassioned debates on the floor about: referendums in Quebec, the wording of Constitutional amendments, federal anti-pornography legislation, Japanese-Canadian Redress campaigns, the Free Trade Agreement, "appropriation of voice" issues, racism in the literary world and globalization's impact on cultural sovereignty. If all this "politics" makes you nervous, think of the alternative: a Canada in which its writers - those tireless creators of national identities - have boo-all to say, *as writers*, about the very issues that define our citizenship.

Having said that, however, I must admit that at the June 2002 AGM, while political issues were very much on the agenda, there was not much debate. Discussion and elaboration, to be sure, but no excited line-ups at the microphones to rouse one's supporters and discompose the opposition. Have we gone soft? No, but we have realized that we are all in the same boat - fiction and non-fiction and children's writers, Newfoundlanders and Saskatchewanites, men and women, racial and ethnic majoritarians and minoritarians, left and right - namely, the sinking ship of state. We're not arguing with each other any more, we're all huddled together biting our nails.

As Alison Lohans, Manitoba-Saskatchewan's representative to the National Council, wrote in her report to the AGM, "It is very clear that now is a time when it is crucial that we, as a Union, speak up in the face of overwhelming, and sometimes bewildering, pressures on the cultural front." These are times when Canadian culture seems to be under siege, whether it's the province of Nova Scotia's summary dissolution of the Nova Scotia Arts Council and its replacement by an appointed committee, or the reports that high school students are still graduating without having read Canadian books, or British Columbia's elimination of the BC Library Purchase Program, the Kootenay School for the Arts, and funding for arts festivals, the expropriation by periodical publishers of freelancers' digital copyrights, or the swift financial meltdown of Stoddart/General Distribution Services.

This last catastrophe has left hundreds of writers collectively owed millions in royalties; and many small publishers will never see the tens of thousands of dollars owed them from the 2001 year (nor the lost income from the 2002 season's books they couldn't afford to publish) nor the inventory held by GDS whose main creditors are now the Bank of Nova Scotia and the Government of Canada. In bankruptcy law, writers are at the very bottom of the list of creditors and their publishers can even be held in contempt of court if they refuse to ship GDS any new inventory: They have to honour their contracts!

As Karl Siegler, redoubtable publisher of Talon Books, told our meeting, "The future looks precarious." And it all began in 1995 when Smiths and Coles bookchains were permitted to merge and form Chapters, which proceeded to close down unprofitable stores, open superstores in direct competition with independents, and impose returns and payments policies on publishers that in effect means the superstore can now hold and then ship back books without ever paying for them. "Publishers have to somehow survive several unsustainable months of net negative sales as they watch the number of books coming back from Chapters/Indigo exceeding the number going out on order. " Increasingly, they also watch how Chapters/Indigo is delisting its Canadian backlist and hiving it off to an American chain of second-hand bookstores, Alibris, who then sell them on Chapters/Indigo web page's Rare and Out-of-Print section, adding huge surcharges on in-print books and giving a cut to Chapters.

I remember the AGM of 1994 when we warned government and industry that no good would come of such Wal-Marting of bookselling. Well, we told them so.

And what has all of this to do with the leaking ship of state? The answer is very very long, and would begin with the signing of the Free Trade Agreement with Washington in 1988. The short answer may be discerned in the other hot political topic of the Writers Union AGM: the International Cultural Instrument.

The Writers Union of Canada, together with other creators' organizations grouped in the International Network for Cultural Diversity, as well as a group of producers, broadcasters, distributors and publishers known as the Coalition for Cultural Diversity - not to mention Heritage Minister Sheila Copps' initiative behind the International Cultural Ministers' Network - are working on drafts of an agreement, the International Cultural Instrument, that would enshrine the right of governments, when negotiating international trade agreements, to protect their society's "cultural diversity rights" (we used to call this "cultural sovereignty" but that scares the Americans) .

An example of what the Instrument is meant to tackle is the current set of negotiations around the General Agreement on Trade in Services [GATS] at the World Trade Organization [WTO] in Geneva. The stated objective of GATS is to liberalize trade in services among members, and heavy pressure is now being exerted on government negotiators by the United States to have culture and cultural policies [aka "cultural services sector"] on the table. If they succeed, we may be looking at living in a world where restrictions on media ownership, provision of public service broadcasting, local content regulations, co-production treaties and even artists' subsidies would all be abandoned by a federal government more than prepared to trade off culture for "considerations" in the agriculture or energy sectors.

When cultural expression is a marketable commodity, then it is the will, as well as right, of governments *in the future* to make cultural policy that is at stake.

To quote from the Coalition for Cultural Diversity: "The situation is not unique to cultural goods and services. There are many other economic sectors where the satisfaction of social needs cannot be left entirely up to free market forces...health, education, the environment, public safety, defence, etc." And that is why it is a good thing when Canadian writers get up on their hind legs and talk passionately about politics.