

CBC budget cuts kill Front Page Challenge

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Audience for longest-running TV panel show in North America, perhaps the world, down to 500,000

By CHRISTOPHER HARRIS
Arts Reporter

TORONTO — *Front Page Challenge*, an institution on Canadian television since 1957, is history.

The CBC announced yesterday the end of the topical quiz show, which it says was the longest-running TV panel show in North America, if not the world. The season's last episode was broadcast in February.

Also ending production after 30 years is the Winnipeg-based choral program *Hymn Sing*, which will broadcast only twice next year. The country's longest-running show is *Hockey Night in Canada*, which started in 1952.

The end of *Front Page Challenge* severs one of the last remaining links between the so-called "golden age" of broadcasting and the projected 500-channel universe.

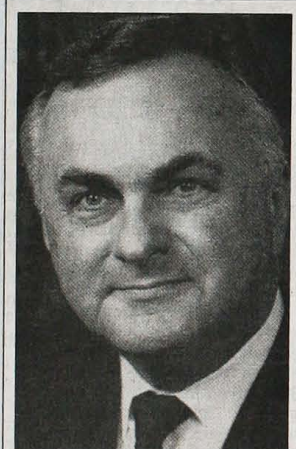
"It feels sad to be doing this. *Front Page Challenge* has had a terrific run — 38 years is a record. It's certainly not a decision we take lightly," said Phyllis Platt, executive director of arts and entertainment for CBC-TV.

The weekly half-hour current-affairs quiz show, with its panel of journalist inquisitors and its mystery challengers plucked from recent headlines, is at least as much a cultural icon as such shows as *Don Messer's Jubilee*, *Hockey Night in Canada* and *The National*. In his 1994 book *The Microphone Wars*, Knowlton Nash called it "the grandfather of all TV programs."

Mystery guests have included six Canadian prime ministers, countless provincial premiers and other politicians.



The CBC has dropped *Front Page Challenge*, a fixture on television for 38 years. The show's regulars (from left) were Betty Kennedy, Fred Davis, Jack Webster, Pierre Berton and Alan Fotheringham. The network cited a changing broadcasting environment. (Canadian Press)



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The Right Honourable Ramon J. Hnatyshyn

Gowling, Strathy & Henderson is very pleased to announce that The Right Honourable Ramon J. Hnatyshyn, P.C., C.C., C.M.M., C.D., Q.C. has rejoined the firm as Partner.

Mr. Hnatyshyn returns to Gowling, Strathy & Henderson after distinguished service as Canada's Governor General from 1990 to 1995. His public career has included numerous cabinet portfolios, including Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, President of the Queen's Privy Council, and Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources. Mr. Hnatyshyn was first elected to the House of Commons in 1974. He was called to the Bar of Saskatchewan in 1957 and to the Bar of Ontario in 1986.

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Statesmen and celebrities have been as diverse as Indira Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Mary Pickford, Eleanor Roosevelt, Gordie Howe and Errol Flynn.

"It was a feisty program at its best," writer Pierre Berton, a panelist on the show since 1957, said yesterday. "We always saw it as a news show, not a variety show, which I think is one reason why it worked so well."

Mr. Berton said he wasn't surprised by the news, however. "Its demise has been predicted for the last 35 years."

Ms. Platt said the decision to cancel *Front Page Channel* and *Hymn Sing* was made during the annual spring review of all programs. The lineup for the 1995-96 season will be announced in June.

"This year, we're also looking at issues of financial constraint, and new expectations from the CRTC," she said. "Writ large, we're having to review our entire programming strategy."

"We're also in a TV environment that has changed so much in the past 38 years. *Front Page Challenge* was created at a time when newsmakers weren't exposed on television nearly as much as they are today."

Front Page Challenge had a loyal core audience, she said, with ratings holding steady in the past five years in the 500,000 to 550,000 range. (As recently as 1978, it sometimes reached more than two million viewers a week.) Ms. Platt did not reveal its budget, but said it was "not an expensive show."

"It doesn't come as that much of a surprise, considering that CBC-TV is in trouble with money," Mr. Berton said. "It's not an expensive show really, but something has to go."

He said he was surprised, however, that the plug was pulled now, at the end of a successful season.

"The network had indicated to us that they were going to keep us on until our 40th season, but I guess they decided against that."

Columnist Allan Fotheringham, who joined the program in 1984, didn't sound too happy.

"I heard about it in the usual classy CBC style — on a speaker phone," he said. "The boss — George Anthony — was conveniently out of town. [The announcement came] very cleverly on a Thursday before the long Easter weekend, when few newspapers were publishing the next day."

The show was launched in 1957 as a summer replacement, first airing on June 24. Although Mr. Berton and moderator Fred Davis have been on the show since 1957, neither was in the original lineup.

The original panelists were newspaper and radio newsman Gordon Sinclair, show-business columnist Alex Barris and the late actress Toby Robins. Mr. Berton replaced Mr. Barris, and in 1962 Betty Kennedy replaced Ms. Robins. Mr. Sinclair remained a fixture on the show until his death in 1984, when he was replaced by Mr. Fotheringham. A fourth regular panelist, Jack Webster, also joined in the 1980s.