

# Arts crowd having pre-Harper panic

## Confusion over commitment to Canada Council

*Le Devoir* set off uproar, *Martin Knelman* writes

### Toronto Star

Jan. 21, 2006. 01:00 AM

By MARTIN KNELMAN

This has been the week of living dangerously for the beleaguered citizens of Canada's arts community. It has also been a week of false expectations, sudden reversals, contradictory rhetoric, farcical misunderstandings and paranoid screams of anguish.

It adds up to a massive pre-Harper panic attack, fuelled by a sense of doom and impending betrayal.

There has not been any poll to determine how people in the arts intend to vote, but if it were up to them, I doubt whether Harper would stand a chance.

With the Conservatives heading for a victory on Monday, the mood has turned so dark that the comments of Bev Oda, Harper's heritage critic, on the subject of increased Canada Council funding, are now regarded as scary — even though just a week earlier, they were considered cause for rejoicing.

The big chill of the past few days was set off by an article in *Le Devoir*, the most influential paper in Montreal's cultural community: "The prodigious jump in the envelope of the Canada Council, from \$150 million to \$300 million by 2008, announced by the Liberals before the election, does not seem certain, contrary to the rumour circulated by the media over the past few days."

In the arts world, this was immediately turned into shocked reports Oda had publicly agreed to honour the funding increase (announced just before the Liberal government fell in November) and less than a week later retracted her commitment. In fact, Oda has been saying pretty much the same thing all along, but her remarks have been subjected to wildly different spins.

Nine days ago, Oda made what sounded like a reassuring promise during an interview on Radio-Canada, the CBC's French-language network.

"We will respect the promise of \$306 million for the Canada Council, which will double the budget of the organization," she said, "because we believe in the importance of the council for the Canadian arts community."

As a result, a huge sigh of relief could be heard on the part of those who work in the cultural field, which contributes \$39 billion to the GDP.

"I am just delighted that all parties have come out in support of the Canada Council," said Karen Kain, chair of that organization and artistic director of the National Ballet of Canada.

The problem lies in the qualifications Oda has mentioned again and again in interviews, including two with the *Star*.

"We'll honour it once we see the plan," she explains. "We have to see how much money is needed and how it will be spent. We need to see a detailed plan of how the Council would spend the money. And we have had no indication of where the Liberals intended to get that money, because it was not in their economic update and there is no trace of it in any fiscal plan we have seen so far."

But she adds: "We may decide the Canada Council needs more than \$300 million."

Liza Frulla, the outgoing Liberal Heritage minister who worked for months to secure desperately needed extra funding to help celebrate the Canada Council's 50th birthday, is furious over Oda's comments.

"She's backtracking," Frulla said in a phone interview with the *Star*.

"I knew this would happen, because Harper said he would not respect any commitments made after the budget was passed (last June). That decision will impact culture as well as the environment and public housing."

The money for the Canada Council was set aside within the Liberal government's fiscal framework, Frulla insists. "It was put aside and protected. I am horrified that after all the work we did over many months to achieve this breakthrough for the arts community, it could all be taken away."

In the wake of the uproar set off by *Le Devoir's* take on Oda, the Movement for Arts and Humanities (MAL), an umbrella organization representing many Quebec arts groups and 14,000 artists, writers and others working in cultural jobs, sounded an alarm.

"The Conservatives' commitment toward the arts and humanities is practically non-existent," MAL claims, citing in particular the matter of increased funding for the Canada Council.

What are the odds the money will flow in time to help the Council celebrate its birthday?

Consult your bookie or your astrologist for definitive answers.

[mknelman@thestar.ca](mailto:mknelman@thestar.ca)