

Research In Parliament

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This paper is an edited version of an address to a joint meeting of the Canadian Geophysical Union (CGU) and the Eastern Snow Conference (ESC) in the West Block, Parliament Buildings, Ottawa, May, 2001.

ABSTRACT

Research does not have a high profile in Canada. It is important that Canadian researchers work to change this. The paper describes the work of the Government Caucus on Post Secondary Education and Research to illustrate how change might be effected. Specific reference is made to the example of the evolution of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research.

RÉSUMÉ

La recherche ne suscite pas beaucoup d'intérêt au Canada. Les chercheurs canadiens doivent absolument faire quelque chose pour changer cette situation. Le document décrit les travaux du Caucus du gouvernement sur l'éducation postsecondaire et la recherche à titre d'illustration des moyens à prendre pour changer la situation. L'évolution des Instituts de recherche en santé du Canada est particulièrement citée à titre d'exemple.

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Presidents David Eaton and Mary Albert and colleagues of the Canadian Geophysical Union and Eastern Snow Conference.

I am pleased to take part in joint meetings of these two important research organizations. It's great to see you all in Ottawa. While I realise that meetings in exotic places like Banff, or for the Eastern Snow Conference, Hanover NH or Peterborough, Ont. have their attractions, I believe that more research groups should, from time to time, meet in the National Capital. Research does not have a high profile in Canada. Raising awareness on Parliament Hill, and among the media which cover Parliament, produces useful national ripples. Did you invite your local MP to any conference events? It was good that Ralph Goodale, Minister of Natural Resources Canada was able to speak to us earlier this evening.

The CGU has an excellent record for nurturing earth and environmental sciences. Your meetings, publications and awards help strengthen a particularly important area of research for this country. The ESC is somewhat older than the CGU – although both essentially matured in the post WW II period. A special feature of the ESC has been the way it has deliberately involved everyone in the scientific enterprise, technicians, students and senior scientists. Both associations maintain student award programs and I am pleased that the Association of Canadian Universities for Northern Studies is sponsoring students to attend these meetings. The demographics of the research community in Canada today make it particularly important to promote student involvement. The ESC's practice of alternating meetings between Canada and the US has been very fruitful in developing co-operation in snow and ice research between the two countries. I extend a special welcome to Americans and others from overseas. I will offer my apologies in advance to the non-Canadian delegates if what I have to say appears a bit parochial.

I am going to talk about research and politics, specifically about research in Parliament.

For a number of years, I have been chair of the Government Caucus on Post Secondary Education and Research (Table 1). This is a group of about twenty MPs, representing all regions of the country having a special interest in research. Beginning in the period of federal cuts and through to today, we have worked with researchers inside and outside government, with university and college faculty and students to strengthen higher education and research in Canada. Those of you from overseas should know that education, including post secondary education, in this country is strongly in the domain of the Provinces and Territories. Nevertheless, my colleagues and I have been closely involved with such federal projects as the Canada Foundation for Innovation (which funds research infrastructure), the Canada Research Chairs Program (funding 2000 chairs in universities across Canada), the Millennium Scholarships Program (providing a million undergraduate scholarships) and the evolution of the old Medical Research Council into the Canadian Institutes of Health Research.

But I believe that our greatest successes have been in raising the profile of research on Parliament Hill and in making the research community more effective in lobbying on its own behalf.

Let me begin with a little story. Some years ago, I was on the Standing Committee for Industry, the committee to which NSERC reports. This committee is also responsible for banking legislation and during a hectic series of hearings on bank mergers we had to break off for the annual public hearings for NSERC. The President of NSERC at that time and colleagues (our colleagues) gave us a nice seminar on the good things the Council had done that year despite the usual chronic shortage of funds. The first question (from an Opposition MP) was "Thank you for an interesting presentation on the work of the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council but what is this 'NSERC' that you keep talking about?"

While our NSERC colleagues did a reasonably good job of concealing their shock that a Member of Parliament did not know how the acronym for their Council is commonly pronounced, their body language did not provide a good start for friendly hearings.

Who was at fault here, if fault is the right word? Should the MP, torn from banking issues to science, have known what "NSERC" was? Should the Council have made sure that he did? Did the NSERC representatives know anything about the members of the Committee that has oversight of their budget? The committee had briefing notes on them!

If they did know the members, did they adapt their presentation on the basis of that knowledge? Did the NSERC representatives consider that in public committee hearings like these, witnesses are essentially talking through the MPs to the official record, the media and the general public? MPs are very conscious of this and their questions are often questions they think the public want asked.

A more general question is, what tiny fraction of one percent of the population of Canada has the slightest notion about NSERC – either the acronym, the way the acronym is pronounced or the Council?

I suspect that the people in this room and a few other rooms like it are the only people in the country who have any real idea about what NSERC is and what it does and yet it is one of the foundations of science in Canada.

Now let me tell you another story.

As you know, the federal system is still recovering from three years of massive cuts – across the board cuts averaging 20%, with individual departmental cuts of up to 60%. When our Caucus on Post Secondary Education and Research looked at the cuts department by department, we discovered that, with the possible

exceptions of Health and Agriculture, researchers and research funds were always cut more than the departmental average. In our view there was no deliberate policy to focus cuts on research. For various reasons our colleagues who are researchers within the federal system were simply more vulnerable than their non-research colleagues. We believe that one reason for this was that they had rarely articulated the nature and importance of their work even to non-scientist colleagues in the same work place, let alone trying to build up a constituency among the general public and its elected representatives.

It is interesting that research in Agriculture and Health appeared to be less hard hit. Health has a sort-of built in public - and therefore political -, support system, while those doing research in Agriculture have remarkable political support from the farm community. Farmers seem to understand and appreciate the place of research in modern society. They form a truly grassroots constituency for agricultural researchers and researchers in general!

I would suggest to you that this sort of support is very important in the political arena. While it may be true that only researchers themselves can fully explain what they are doing and why it is important and should be funded, there is always an element of self-interest when a group lobbies on its own behalf. Our colleagues in Astronomy and Astro-Physics are engaged in a very effective lobby at present. They are doing all the right things, lobbying Ministers and senior public servants, contacting MPs in their ridings and on the Hill, writing to national and local newspapers etc. But at the same time, they have encouraged all our neighbours, adults and children, who are amateur stargazers to contact their MPs. These are essentially a group of ordinary citizens lobbying for increased funding for one particular area of research. Our historian colleagues have harnessed local genealogists - everyone interested in their family tree - in support of a lobby they are engaged in to change in the way Census data are released. Canadian nephrologists are engaged in a similar exercise.

A final anecdote.

When the Prime Minister announced the two thousand Canada Research Chairs (an extraordinary step for research in this country), he said something like " You know there are no votes in this program, it's simply the right thing to do". He was right on both counts.

Why would a Prime Minister who is very supportive of research feel obliged to mention votes on a national occasion like this? Perhaps it sounds crass to you, we all know that politicians are always looking for votes! In fact, he was simply pointing out that there is no public constituency for research in Canada.

At the moment, when the funding scene is better than it was, that may not seem to be a serious matter. But I would suggest to you all that it is a fundamental weakness in our research system, one that will become obvious again when funds

are scarce. I would suggest that public monies are always at risk if there is no public support for them. And it is not just a matter of the money, if there is no general approval and appreciation of research out there, a career in research will not pop up naturally on the radar screens of young people at critical stages in their lives.

Going back to the banking hearings of the Standing Committee on Industry I mentioned earlier. Witnesses for and against the bank mergers knew when they appeared that they were reaching out to the public through the MPs. The banks did not reach out far enough and they did not get their mergers. While I am sure that you do not remember specifics of those committee hearings, I bet all Canadians here remember something from the elaborate lobbying process on bank mergers that culminated at that committee. Both sides in the bank merger debate had worked hard to harness support from the grassroots to the Prime Minister. As an MP, I had heard from individuals and groups in my riding, I had attended local public meetings and I had participated in debates and interviews here on the Hill. MPs from every region spoke about the bank merger issue in our National Caucus meetings. When witnesses came for the public hearings here, they already knew where each party and individual MPs stood on the merger issue. When the bank presidents appeared before the Committee, I suspect that the President of my bank knew that I was one of his customers and probably knew the size of our mortgage!

Can you imagine the research community engaging all of Canada in such a way? I can because the extraordinary metamorphosis of the Medical Research Council into the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, with a doubling of health research funding in one year, was the result of just such a nation-wide exercise. It engaged the medical research community and provinces, the health research community, including social scientists and a large section of the general public who volunteer in local health support groups (Bliss, 2000, Plamondon, 2001).

Although gaining support in Parliament is best achieved by harnessing public opinion, the only people who could have initiated and sustained such a lobby were the researchers themselves.

Out of self-interest and for the public good I believe that researchers like you, must, as an ongoing part of your professional lives, become actively involved in public policy. You must explain to the public and their representatives what you do, why you are excited about it, why it is important and why it is worth paying for. No matter how carefully peer-reviewed, the grants and allocations that you receive are public monies which someone, like me, has to justify.

My colleagues and I on the Government Caucus on Post Secondary Education and Research like to think that we have done a reasonable job on some of these things. There have been considerable changes in the research community since the

NSERC incident that I described. The current President of NSERC, in addition to being a fine scientist is an excellent lobbyist for research in general and for his Council in particular. NSERC and the Partnership Group on Science and Engineering, (PAGSE) organise regular Bacon and Eggheads breakfasts on the Hill. At these leading scientists explain their work to MPs and Senators. The Social Sciences and Humanities Federation has similar Breakfasts on the Hill and the SSHRC brings its top grantees to meet one on one with MPs. All the granting Councils and the national bodies representing higher education and research are much more sophisticated in these matters than they were a few years ago. But there is still a long way to go, especially with respect to widespread public support, until research has the prestige in Canada that it does in some other jurisdictions.

My colleagues and I look forward to continuing to work with you. As I said at the beginning, I am delighted that both associations decided to hold their annual meetings in the National Capital and took the extra step of having an event on Parliament Hill. I hope that others follow your example.

Thank you for inviting me to join you.

REFERENCES

Bliss, Michael, 2000. *Beyond the Granting Agency*, Medical Research Council of Canada, ISBN 0-662-64891-9, 26p

Plamondon, Robert, 2001. Transforming Health Research in Canada: The Making of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, a case study by the Public Policy Forum, in prep. Bob Plamondon, 1510 Laperriere Avenue, Suite 400, Ottawa, ON, K1Z 7T1

Table 1



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
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PETER ADAMS, M.P., Député
PETERBOROUGH
Chair/Président
Government Caucus on Post Secondary Education and Research/
Caucus du gouvernement sur l'éducation postsecondaire et la recherche

Government Caucus on Post Secondary Education and Research/ Caucus du gouvernement sur l'éducation postsecondaire et la recherche

The *Government Caucus on Higher Education of the 35th Parliament (1993-1997)* was established in 1997 as the *Government Caucus on Post Secondary Education and Research*. This is a group of MPs who have a special interest in federal involvement in post-secondary education. The Caucus works within the National Caucus on Social Policy.

The Executive of the Caucus includes MPs from all regions of Canada. It meets and corresponds with groups with post-secondary and research interests and assists them in communicating their views within the federal system. The Executive keeps in touch with the entire Government Caucus but especially with MPs who have universities or colleges in their ridings.

In the last Parliament, this group lobbied for such things as the Canada Foundation for Innovation, the improved student loan and RESP programs, national scholarship programs as well as improved funding for research. In this Parliament, we have supported increased funding for the granting councils, including the development of the Canadian Institutes for Health Research, improved core funding for colleges and universities, the strengthening of research within the federal system, increased funding for the arts and social sciences, northern research issues and the Canada Research Chairs.

We meet frequently with student, faculty and research groups. We welcome input from the post-secondary education and research community of Canada

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Peter Adams, M.P./député (Peterborough), Chair/Président
Carolyn Bennett, M.P./députée (St. Paul's)
Aileen Carroll, M.P./députée (Barrie-Simcoe-Bradford)
Irwin Cotler, M.P./député (Mont Royal/Mont-Royal)
John Godfrey, M.P./député (Oxford)
John Godfrey, MP/député (Doo Valley West/Don Valley Ouest)
Stan Keyes, M.P./député (Hamilton West/Hamilton Ouest)
Sophia Leung, M.P./députée (Vancouver-Kingsway)
Anita Neville, MP/députée (Winnipeg South Centre)
Bernard PARRY, député/M.P. (Pierrefonds-Dollard)
Andy Scott, M.P./député (Friderickton)
Andrew Telegdi, M.P./député (Kitchener-Waterloo)

Reg Alcock, M.P./député (Winnipeg South/Winnipeg Sud)
Charles Carcia, M.P./député (Davenport)
Jeannot Castonguay, Député, (Madawaska Restigouche)
Wayne Easter, M.P./député, (Malpeque)
Raymond Folco/député/M.P. (Laval West/Laval-Ouest)
Bill Graham, M.P./député (Toronto Centre – Rosedale)
Karen Kraft Sloan, M.P./députée (York/North/York-Nord)
Yves Morin, Sénateur
Stephen Owen, MP/député (Vancouver Quai)
Karen Redman, M.P./députée (Kitchener Centre/Centre)
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Le Caucus du gouvernement sur l'éducation supérieure de la 35^e législature (1993-1997) est devenu en 1997 le *Caucus du gouvernement sur l'éducation postsecondaire et la recherche*. Il s'agit d'un groupe de députés intéressés à une participation fédérale dans l'éducation postsecondaire. Le caucus travaille au sein du Caucus national sur la politique sociale.

L'exécutif compte des députés de toutes les régions du Canada. Il communique, par réunion ou correspondance, avec des groupes impliqués dans l'éducation postsecondaire et la recherche et les aide à faire valoir leurs vues dans le système fédéral. Il garde contact avec le caucus du gouvernement en entier mais tout particulièrement avec les députés qui ont des universités ou des collèges dans leur circonscription.

Durant la dernière législature, le groupe a œuvré en faveur de la Fondation canadienne pour l'innovation, de l'amélioration des programmes de prêt aux étudiants et de REEF, des programmes nationaux de bourses d'études et de fonds accrus pour la recherche. Au cours de la présente législature, nous avons appuyé l'augmentation du financement pour les conseils subventionnaires, ce qui comprend la création des Instituts canadiens de recherche en santé, un meilleur financement de base pour les collèges et universités, le renforcement de la recherche dans le système fédéral, l'octroi de fonds supplémentaires pour les arts et les sciences sociales, les questions de la recherche dans le Nord et les chaires de recherche du Canada.

Nous rencontrons souvent des groupes d'étudiants, de professeurs et de chercheurs, et sommes toujours heureux d'avoir des contributions de la communauté canadienne de l'éducation postsecondaire et de la recherche.

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