

Merging of councils may be unproductive marriage

By Chad Gaffield
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The federal budget announced the reunification of the Canada Council and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. This announcement might be interpreted as ending a trial separation.

Until 1978, the funding of research in the humanities and social sciences was part of the Canada Council's mandate. Thus, the reunification could be seen in terms of two estranged spouses deciding that life alone was less attractive than hoped.

In fact, the budget announcement was unexpected by both agencies. Their split in the 1970s followed extensive studies and consultations. In 1992, government leaders arrived at the decision all by themselves.

And it should be emphasized that the metaphor of remarriage does not apply here. The creation of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council was more analogous to the leaving home of a maturing young adult. When the Canada Council was first formed, research activity in Canada was quite limited. Many Canadians had to seek advanced training in the U.S. or Europe, especially England.

Through the 1960s and 1970s, Canada developed research in all fields including the humanities and social sciences. New graduate programs and new research projects were established. The result was twofold: fewer and fewer Canadians were forced to go elsewhere for training, and more research became available about the Canadian experience. Instead of foreign-trained experts applying research findings from other countries, scholars could use Canadian research to address the important questions of the day.

The example of the discipline of history illustrates

To understand our changing society, Canada needs the research capability provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

the extent of this development. As late as the early 1960s, Canadian history was a minor field in our universities. It was taught as an aspect of colonial history, usually within the evolution of the Commonwealth. Perhaps 10 per cent of the professors in university history departments were actively researching the Canadian experience.

Increasing interest in Canada fuelled the humanities and social sciences so that by the mid-1970s a consensus emerged concerning the need for a separate agency.

The result has been impressive despite very modest funding levels. Major research projects have addressed many of the key questions facing Canadians: women and work, the condition of children, aging, ethics, values, Canadian literature, and the list goes on.

Perhaps the most striking initiative associated with the maturing of research in the humanities and social sciences involves collaborative efforts with scholars from the sciences, engineering and medicine. Such efforts reflect a growing awareness of the inherent wholeness of truly important questions.

This awareness is now most evident in research on the environment. Questions of pollution, for example, involve historical, social, ethical, economic, and cultural issues as well as those of health and science.

The late 20th century calls for stronger, not weaker,

links among researchers in the sciences, humanities, social sciences, medicine, and engineering. Canadian researchers appear to have begun forging these links in ways appropriate to the changing global context.

Over and over, experts tell us that urban industrial society is being transformed by the arrival of the service-based economy of the Information Age. Over and over, we are warned that knowledge is the new prized commodity determining wealth and power.

In the 19th century, industrialization redefined the meaning of land by showing how the value added in a two-acre factory could dwarf even the best agricultural return of vast farms. The result became all too familiar to Canadian farmers. Now industrial production has become subservient to knowledge production.

The meaning of this transformation is clear. The comparative advantage of any country now lies in its research and development.

Why the government decided to return the granting agency for humanities and social science to the situation of the 1978 is a mystery. In contrast, the probable results of this action seem obvious. The activities of the performance-oriented Canada Council and those of the research-oriented Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council are not completely different but their contributions to society are distinct.

The prospect of facing the great challenges of our times without a growing and visible agency for the humanities and social sciences is chilling. Canada desperately needs a strong and concerted policy for research and development. It will be tragic, though understandable, if no Canadian feels like singing and dancing by the end of the century.

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