The Importance of University-Community Interaction: Community Involvement and Political Sustainability in Canada's Publicly Funded Research and Teaching System

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Description of the Author

Peter Adams retired as MP, Peterborough, Ontario, in 2006. During most of his time in the House of Commons, he was chair of the Government Caucus on Post Secondary Education and Research. He was also chair of Standing Committees such as Procedure and House Affairs and Human Resources Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. He was Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, Service Canada and Minister of Democratic Renewal. He is a Member of the Privy Council.

Prior to entering federal politics, Peter Adams academic background includes that he is a world respected researcher who specialized in snow and ice and who has worked in many parts of the Canadian Arctic. In addition to authoring numerous papers on lake ice and glaciers, he also served as Director of McGill's subarctic research laboratory in Schefferville, and was the Dean of Science and Dean of Graduate Studies at Trent University.

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on talks given and conversations had during a visit to the Community Development Institute at the University of Northern British Columbia. In it, the author makes the case for more active interaction between university researchers, elected officials at all levels, and communities in which universities are located. He draws on experience as an academic in the Parliament of Canada during and after the budget cuts of the 1990s which severely impacted the Canadian academic community. Progress made by the research community, since those times, is described. As the research system of Canada is more dependent on the public purse than that of any comparable nation, the paper argues that Canadian researchers should be particularly diligent in engaging politicians and the public.

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Introduction

"Sustainability" is a popular word nowadays. To 'sustain' used to be used mainly in the sense of to hold up or support. In ecosystems terminology it came to be used in the context of a system being able to perpetuate, or sustain, itself. This useful concept has been applied to business, financial and other systems, even including universities in British Columbia (1). As the research and associated teaching system of Canada stands out among the developed nations for its dependence on the public purse, this paper argues that 'political sustainability' – retaining the support of those who control the public purse, should be built into the system. Involvement and support of elected officials is, of course, a surrogate for the involvement and support of the general public which in a publicly funded system, ultimately determines the sustainability of the research and teaching system. Arguments made here support the view (2) that universities, and especially university researchers, should, out of self-interest and a sense of public responsibility, engage with the communities in which they are based.

The fragility of the research and teaching system, experience of the 1990s

I served in the Parliament of Canada from 1993 to 2006. As an academic faculty member and administrator turned Member of Parliament (M.P.), I was struck by the lack of awareness within the academic community of the dependence of their world on public and political support and of the roles of M.P.s in sustaining that support. One researcher actually told a group of M.P.s that his research grants were not political but were peer-reviewed. Another told our caucus group that his M.P. had never been near his campus and had no interest in science. He clearly assumed that it was the M.P.'s responsibility to seek out the researcher not vice versa. Sitting in on committee hearings once, I observed the body language of a group of academics pitching an increase in funding, when one of

the M.P.s did not recognize "N-SERC" as the acronym for Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council. They were struck by the ignorance of an M.P. concerning the common pronunciation of the acronym for a Council, which was central to their lives (nowadays representing close to a billion dollars per year of public investment into science research). At that moment, at least, it did not strike them that the M.P., likely well briefed on the Council and its budget, had never spoken to anyone who used the acronym.

The fragility of the research and teaching system of Canada became apparent during the federal budget cuts of the 1990s. In the case of federal departments, the research capacity of each department was almost invariably cut more that the department itself. This was not a political decision. Managers within many of these departments did not really understand, appreciate or care about what their researchers were doing and so did not or could not defend them against budget cuts. Where managers were better informed, they had to defend rather vague, long term, gains (the more obvious benefits of research) against the immediate demands of the cuts. Except in a very few cases, M.P.s saw no sign of widespread public support for researchers at that time, comparable with the public support that was apparent for, say farmers. When the federal cuts flowed to the Provinces and Territories, post-secondary education and research suffered at the expenses of health care and education at the elementary and secondary levels. The same thing almost invariably happens when Provinces cut their budgets, post-secondary education and research are hardest hit. Research is invariably more vulnerable than 'education' right down to the campus level.

Since the period of the cuts, remarkable progress has been made in re-building and revitalizing a research and associated teaching system in Canada. It is now a system which appears to be reasonably sustainable in human resources terms. Young people seem to be attracted to it in reasonable numbers and nationally we are in a brain gain rather than a brain drain situation, with a net immigration of researchers and of research-bound students. But the system is still a construct of public policy which is unusually dependent on public and, therefore, political support. Indeed, among the G7 nations, the

research system in Canada is the most dependent on the public purse – almost twice the average dependence. Nowadays, all four levels of government (municipal, provincial, federal and First Nations) are directly involved in funding post-secondary education and research. The funds involved exceed $30 billion per year including, conservatively, more than $9 billion from the federal government alone.

In this paper I address questions such as: Is the academic community better prepared to defend its share of the public purse today than it was in the 1990s? Are the four funding levels of government and the general public sufficiently informed about the fundamental importance of the post-secondary research and teaching system for our economy and way of life? Would the general public and elected officials 'go to bat' for research in general, or a particular discipline, the next time cuts in government funding occur? To what extent have researchers, particularly university researchers, in Canada built the experience of the 1990s into their professional way of life to make the system within which they work, more politically sustainable?

In responding to questions like these, my general sense is that progress has been made but that there is still a great deal to do.

Progress since the 1990s

At the national level, diverse organizations such as NSERC, the Social Science and Humanities Council (SSHRC), the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the Canadian Federation of Humanities and Social Sciences (CFHSS), the Canadian Consortium for Research, the Partnership Group for Science and Engineering (PAGSE), the National Research Council, the Canada Foundation for Innovation, the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations, the National Federation of Students, the Graduate Students Council and the Canadian Association of University Teachers, and allied and related groups have begun to communicate with each other and now make themselves felt on Parliament Hill alongside others with an interest in the public purse, for example the farmers who I

mention from time to time in this paper. While some of these groups were founded after the cuts of the 1990s, all have re-organized and re-focused.

The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada has developed an important coordinating role for the campus-based research community and beyond. The Association of Community Colleges of Canada has also become more active at the national level stressing, among other things, roles of the colleges in research in this country.

In recent years, observing academic delegations before standing committees of both the House of Commons and the Senate, I got the impression that they had at least talked to like-minded people beforehand so that the committees were receiving some sort of consistent message. I realize that this is not easy in the academic community! Also, nowadays, the delegations generally appear to have done their homework with respect to the mandates and interests of the committees concerned and the backgrounds of the M.P.s and Senators on them. When I was first elected, there was a tendency for academics to fly by the seats of their pants on these occasions. They tended to forget that they were on the public record (often talking directly to the public via TV) and that theirs was a presentation which had been preceded, and would often be followed, by sophisticated, competing, requests for funding from quite different sectors of society

Also, the research community now makes itself felt, year-round, on Parliament Hill, through a variety of well-organized lobbing activities. They have taken a leaf out of the book of farmers, a sophisticated lobby group, by offering breakfasts for politicians and senior public servants. There is an axiom among lobbyists that carries a great deal of weight: “If you feed them they will come”. The monthly Bacon and Eggheads breakfasts sponsored by NSERC and PAGSE and the Breakfasts on the Hill (SSHRC and CFHSS) are now regular entries on the schedules of M.P.s and Senators. At these, academics from all regions speak eloquently and passionately about their work, addressing topics that often have quite immediate public policy implications – such as the future of the Boreal forest or aspects of Islamic studies in Canada. The presentations are usually not in

themselves politically argumentative but they regularly generate questions which are. Another sign of progress is that the breakfast speakers nowadays finish on time so that M.P.s can ask questions before leaving for their next meeting.

Young and less young scholars now regularly make house calls, visiting M.P.s and Senators in their offices on the Hill. They discuss their research, its relevance to our quality of life and the programs which sustain it. M.P.s also receive visits from representatives of groups such as the Chairs of Biology, the Research Librarians, the Medical Students of Canada, representatives of individual academic institutions or regional grouping of institutions. Some of these groups sponsor receptions or other events on or around Parliament Hill. In addition, there are periodic drives for particular research projects or for special funding for disciplines and groups of disciplines.

One of the trickier aspects of this sort of activity is achieving some sort of a balance between the general case ("science is good for you, please give it more money") and particular long- or short- term needs such as the funding of the Light Source in Saskatoon, genetics research in Quebec or pine beetle research in BC. One interesting example of this during the recovery from the cuts of the 1990s, was the case of social science and humanities research which had been particularly hard hit. The social science and humanities story was less easy to tell than that of say, health research – even though health research involves a good deal of social science. Some sort of an agreement was reached between the research granting councils so that the message became that there should be a specified overall increase in funding for the councils that year "with a relatively larger increase for the social sciences and humanities". The success of the academic community in conveying this message was apparent during the Budget Speech when the Minister received a standing ovation from all sides of the House for using this very phrase. Had this been a message for farmers, it would have appeared in farm media and beyond, across the country. As it was, I doubt that it rippled far beyond Ottawa even among the research community. But it was a source of pride for the newly invigorated research activists around Parliament Hill.

The campaign to increase funding for the group of disciplines in astronomy and astrophysics was another example of a disciplinary success story embedded in the general drive to increase research funding. In this case, the 'ask' included funds for telescopes overseas, not an easy sell. The astronomers made presentations to committees and conducted rounds of lobbying on Parliament Hill. They generated some very timely media coverage. However their campaign was particularly notable for its involvement of amateur stargazers. M.P.s received letters, calls, emails and visits from constituents, including many children, about the importance of astronomy. My sense from recent visits to schools and science fairs is that the astronomers are still actively engaging the general public in their home communities. The generation of support among the general public, especially in M.P.s' ridings, can have a powerful effect in Parliament.

The most outstanding example of a successful political campaign, within the general campaign to strengthen research, during my years in Parliament also involved active reaching out to the general public at the community level. This was the drive that resulted in the transformation of the old Medical Research Council (MRC) into the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) with the associated huge increase in funding (3). The campaign reached every Province and Territory as well as every corner of the House of Commons and the Senate. It reached deep into the bureaucracy. It involved a good deal of alliance building within the research community – for example the explicit inclusion of social science research within the CIHR. The general public was involved through the healthcare groups such as the Cancer, Alzheimer's and Diabetes support groups that are part of the social fabric of every community in the country. It is interesting that such groups are now built into the mandate of the CIHR. The old MRC, arguably the most closed of the granting councils, was replaced by an organization which deliberately engages the public in its research work and which, therefore, has built–in political support at the community level. It also happens to be the best funded of the granting councils.

An effective national research system requires an appropriate balance between government and campus-based research. Despite efforts by the National Research

Council and some others, 'government science' has recovered less effectively from the cuts of the 1990s than college and university science. Before I became an M.P., I can remember complaints from university colleagues that government scientists had unfairly easy, less competitive, access to research support. In recent years, the more common complaint is from government researchers who feel that university colleagues have the advantage through their access to both provincial and federal funding and because they can bring pressure to bear on every elected official in the country at the community level. The appointment of a permanent Science Advisor to the Prime Minister was a step forward for both government and campus science, especially the former. The Science Advisor's office can be an influential focus for research in the federal system.

Also, there has been a modest strengthening of private sector research in Canada (i.e. a decrease in dependence of research on the public purse) during the period discussed here. Even though this has important implications for the entire research community in Canada, the focus in this paper is on research that is directly funded by public funds.

Lessons learned?

So, there has been considerable progress in strengthening the political support system for research at the national level. However, even at that level there is still no over-arching national science body along the lines of the National Science Foundation in the United States or in the style of some of the national committees through which, for example, diverse farm groups focus their resources.

I have mentioned farmers a few times in this paper as a foil for some of my arguments. When I was the M.P. for Peterborough, Ontario, I represented a community with a university, a college, a wide variety of industries and businesses and a remarkably diverse farming sector. As a result, I was able to compare, firsthand, the lobbying practices of the different sectors. Farmers in general and some of their sub-groups in particular, notably the Supply Managed commodity groups, are very conscious of the need to constantly keep up with the times in their farming and business practices and to equally

persistently educate and lobby the public and politicians about their strengths and needs. The Supply Managed group in particular knows that its fine system of production is a construct of public policy that faces opposition at home and overseas.

Supply managed farmers have strong, self-funded provincial and national organizations that are very firmly founded on well-informed, politically active, grassroots groups and individuals. I mentioned earlier that college and university funding now flows from all four levels of government. Community level, grassroots public support (mentioned here as having great resonance in Parliament) is influential at all four of these levels. I suppose that there are a couple of thousand college and university campuses across the country, each with an MP, an MLA and municipal councillors and often with First Nations councillors. This is a significant lobbying advantage in a publicly funded research and teaching system, **if the research community on each campus takes the time to interact with the local community.**

My sense is that the political engagement of the university researchers is still weak at the community level. And this is a level at which engagement of the general public is most effective. Science fairs (wonderful events though they are) do not have the political or public buzz of farms fairs. Farmers use their fairs and similar local events, for good old-style lobbying but also to establish long term, informal relationships with elected officials. They also organize their fairs so that the general public is attracted to them and learns about agriculture from them.

Use of the media is important in reaching elected officials and the general public. Media coverage of science in Canada has improved in both quality and quantity during the last decade. Some of the lobbying activities that I have described have the effect of generating media interest. It is now quite normal for journalists to show up at science events on the Hill, such as the research breakfasts. They also follow research-related committee hearings and debates with more interest. This suggests that the media sense public interest in science and that researchers' efforts to reach the public are becoming more effective. I strongly encourage university researchers to take the time to tell their

stories to local and national media. In the matter of media coverage, we do benefit in Canada from the efforts of the National Science Foundation in engaging the US media. However, I have still to see advertisements promoting research alongside Supply Managed farming advertisements during hockey games!

So, I do believe that there has been some progress in developing a public and political support system for research in Canada but with most of the improvement being at the national level. Efforts of the last decade have succeeded in making science a major item on the federal agenda. However, there is still a great deal to be done at the local level that is important in political and financial terms and in terms of securing widespread, grassroots public support for research. Universities and individual faculty must reach out to their communities to develop a more widespread understanding of the place of research in the post-secondary education system of Canada, and in our quality of life.

The improvements of recent years, perhaps quite naturally, have been largely at the institutional level – at the level of the academic institutions themselves and of their national organizations in Ottawa. Unlike the farmers in my old riding, university researchers are protected from the full glare of public scrutiny, by their institutions. As a result, they tend to be less aware of the public and political realities of their situation than would otherwise be the case. In the 1990s, this false sense of security did not serve the academic community well. As someone who believes passionately that our present and future quality of life depends on education and research, I urge every individual researcher to become better informed about the fragility of their research and teaching system and to build outreach in support of it into their working lives.

The National Science Foundation, in the United States, encourages individual researchers to become engaged with the public by giving credit in grant applications and reports for evidence of appearances before legislative committees, work in schools and service clubs and media activity. Perhaps we should do more of this?

Concluding remarks

Although my focus here has been on engagement of researchers in the political process, I would again stress that this is simply one aspect of engaging the general public who are the source of virtually all science funding in Canada as well as being the source of all future researchers. Political sustainability of research and its sustainability in human resources terms are tightly interrelated.

One of the purposes of this paper is to place on record lessons learned in the 1990s so that we do not have to re-invent the wheel when the next funding crisis comes. A small amount of literature to support this purpose is available, including the Plamondon reference (3) and 4, 5, and 6, below.

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