GETTING TO KNOW OURSELVES: THE ASSOCIATION FOR CANADIAN STUDIES AND ITS EVOLVING 'IDENTITIES'

PART 2 OF 2

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There are many individuals and organizations in Canada that contribute to the ongoing discussion and debate about who we are as a people and as a country and that seek to identify the principal factors that account for our continued transformation. There are also many ways to approach the issue. As debates about Canadian identity evolve, so too have there been changes across those institutions that engage in such debates. Canada's universities have played a pivotal role in ongoing reflection around our multiple identities. Over the past few decades, our universities have established different centres and programs that are dedicated specifically to identity issues. Since the 1970's there has been an expansion of centres for Canadian, Quebec, Aboriginal, Immigration and Ethnic studies and a broad range of other university-driven initiatives that bring together faculty and students across disciplines. The academics involved with such programs have generated an inestimable number of conferences and publications.

Government plays a vital role in developing policies and programs that respond to identity needs and have invested significantly in the diverse expression of cultures that collectively defines us. Legislative measures have played a fundamental role in shaping Canadian identities. Indeed law professors are not sufficiently present in national conversations about identity.

As regards the nation's public conversation around identities, there are challenges associated with cooperation between government and the academy. With faculty members seeking to protect their academic freedom there has been some reluctance to establish partnerships with government in undertaking projects that examine identity. For its part government expects that the academy will be mindful of the fact that, when it extends funding for research on identity, policy objectives frequently need to be taken into account. Yet increasingly there appears to be recognition that government is an essential partner in identity debates and therefore, at times, some degree of collaboration is necessary. It is the form taken by such collaboration that is often crucial in ensuring satisfactory outcomes for academic and policy-maker alike.

Since the 1970's, a range of institutions have been established whose aim is to bridge the gap between the two sectors and ensure that joint research efforts do not compromise either academics and/or policy-makers. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council provides rigorously peer-reviewed assessments of projects often initiated by government that offer funds for academic research. But SSHRC is a granting organization and therefore does not generate its own research. Outside the academy, a segment of the non-governmental sector offers a forum for policy makers, academic and non-academic researchers as well as those agencies offering services to the public, where together they can all help identify research priorities and, on that basis, attempt to deliver a relevant research agenda. The specific NGO stakeholders often come from the aforementioned sectors. But NGO efforts to establish joint collaboration can also be challenging, as partners serve different constituencies with varying and sometimes conflicting interests. For example academic or other professional associations that constitute an important segment of the NGO sector are mandated to represent the views of their members and frequently advocate for a particular set of goals consistent with academic needs.

As regards social and cultural policies in Canada, the NGO sector that engages in such issues both via reflection and/or service delivery has evolved dramatically over the past few decades. Several organizations once thought to be either fixtures in the NGO landscape or potentially significant sectoral actors have simply ceased to exist. One thinks of the Council for Canadian Unity, the Canadian Policy Research Networks, the Canadian Council for Learning to name but a few. Yet others are struggling to survive after experiencing massive cuts to funding. One thinks of the youth exchange program Katimavik, the International Council for Canadian Studies, the Metropolis Centres for research on Immigration and Integration and several others. Learned societies will undoubtedly struggle with recent cuts to travel assistance programs for conference attendees from the Federation for the Social Sciences and Humanities. And Canadian Studies centres in Canada and abroad have been the object of changes in strategic direction on the part of universities, and also had to learn to work with fewer operating dollars.

A few NGOs possess significant endowment funds that enable them to persist despite changes in the economy and in the funding environment. Many have however been affected by market volatility and as a result low returns on interest have seen the scope of their activities reduced. Former ACS Board member Chad Gaffield once suggested that the strength of the ACS was that, in the absence of meaningful endowment, it was forced to be entrepreneurial. Those organizations that will survive the ongoing challenge of the current NGO environment will indeed need to innovate.

The case can be made successfully that, over the past two decades in particular, the Association for Canadian Studies has made an important contribution to the national public conversation about Canadian identity. It has done so by generating its own research and forums rather than simply facilitating them for others. It has also been able to move quickly to take advantage of opportunities as they arose, and with its strong cross-sectoral network of contacts has been good on delivery when undertaking the organization of an event, the production of a publication and in completing research and disseminating it. The ACS has built brand value by focusing its research and activities on issues of the day that are on the public and policy-makers radar. In part it was the value of our brand that enabled us to help restore the National Metropolis and manage it successfully in 2013 and we look forward to again convening the Metropolis network for a sixteenth edition of the Conference in 2014.

But to borrow a line from Bob Dylan, "the times they are a-changing" and the Association for Canadian Studies needs to partially rethink its brand as we go forward. We need to rethink the role of membership in our organization and the importance of numbers in this regard. We need to rethink the way we disseminate our conferences, publications and research and, in an environment where the public is inundated with websites and aps, ensure that what we offer is both distinct and relevant. We need to think of how the various projects we undertake meaningfully relate to our mission and governance. We need to think of who are our natural partners. We should ensure that the term 'association' properly reflects the scope of activities that have been undertaken by the ACS or represent the diversity of its principal stakeholders and funders. In other words, we need to be able to answer who and what we are, as an association.

On June 11th, the principal funder of the ACS, the Canadian Studies program of the Department of Canadian

Heritage reinvented itself and is now called the Canadian History Fund. That change is not without significance for the ACS as it will imply that its vital partnership agreement with PCH will be almost entirely oriented towards promoting knowledge about Canadian history. That by no means prevents the ACS from undertaking other activities that are consistent with its broader scope. Over the past two decades, the ACS has widened its sphere of activities and the range and diversity of its partners with a diverse conference, research and publications agenda that goes well beyond the issue of Canadian history.

It is legitimate to ask whether the title "Association for Canadian Studies" fairly describes initiatives such as the work we do for Public Safety Canada on perceptions of terrorism, counterterrorism and security. Where is the intersection between the National Metropolis Conference and the National History Conferences? With this and various other current and future opportunities in mind we are in the process of establishing the Canadian Institute for Identities and Migration (CIIM/ICIM). It will undertake research, conferences and publications that focus on issues of identity, distinct but not separate from the agenda of the ACS, which will be increasingly focused on expanding public knowledge about history and supporting history education. The ACS will continue to oversee any project or activity related to Canadian history. These include, but are not limited to, the ACS annual conference, the Canadian Issues/Thèmes Canadiens quarterly magazine, the ongoing development of a national network of Francophone history teachers, the creation of learning materials and the organization of student forums.

CIIM will be a good fit for much of the non-history agenda. It will effectively capture our publication Canadian Diversity, the Canadian Journal for Social Research, our public opinion research touching upon various issues, the annual conference of the Canadian Ethnic Studies Association in which we act as the managing partner, the Metropolis Conference, various international projects and other related activities, notably in the areas of diversity and specifically the study of migration, language, ethnicity and religion. CIIM aims to be a think tank that offers a national forum for cross-sectoral dialogue between Canadians about who are as people(s). We have carefully focused on identities in the plural as we are focused on Canada as well the comparative experience around identities elsewhere in the globe. Hence the name is designed to give us a wide mandate when it comes to undertaking projects on a bi-national or multi-national basis.