Canadian Studies Abroad: Perils and Prospects

John W. Graham

Presented at The Association for Canadian Studies in the United States (ACSUS) Conference
Montréal, Québec | 13–16 November 2019

Seven years ago, now almost eight, John Baird, then Stephen Harper's Foreign Minister, withdrew funding for the Canadian Studies program. The reason: it was part of a government-wide squeeze to balance the Tory budget in advance of an election wherein so called expendable programs were cut. The shock was felt around the worldwide program by foreign students, universities, and by the many Canadian embassies and consulates that had enormously benefitted from the links with Canadian Studies.

How could this have happened? How could a program that sustained over 7,000 scholars with an infrastructure of 28 national associations, a program that constituted a key dimension of our cultural diplomacy and one that generated impressive financial returns to Canada, be cancelled? And the savings? At the time the program was cut, the cost to the federal treasury was about five and a half million dollars—in government terms "peanuts," especially for an item that was regarded by many as one of Foreign Affairs' most cost effective small-scale programs.

The questions are puzzling and, as you can imagine, the answers are not all heartening.

Canadian Studies abroad is a frustrating case study—the interstices of which have been closely and very helpfully examined by Stephen Brooks in his recent book.[1] My approach complements Stephen's work but tackles it from the perspective of my own experience.

I will begin at the beginning of Canadian Studies as a government program. In the mid 1970s I was the director of the then very small and sleepy Academic Relations Division in External Affairs. I was lucky with the quality of my colleagues, the judgement, and bureaucratic guile of my immediate boss, Patrick Reid, and not least, in timing. There was for once money around that could be quietly transferred from neighbouring divisions (who, we decided, had more than they needed). Building on the pre-existing base of the study of Canada at Bordeaux, Harvard, Duke, London, and a few other universities, on funds for the study of Canada agreed between Prime Minister Tanaka of Japan and Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau in 1974 and a few $100,000 squirreled from within the Department, Canadian Studies was officially launched by Minister Allan MacEachen at the University of Edinburgh in October 1975.[2] I remember drafting the Minister's speech, especially because he insisted that parts of it should be in Gaelic—a tongue that almost no one in Edinburgh spoke (and, of course, nor did I.)

The occasion was the inauguration of the University's new chair and Centre of Canadian Studies.[3] The Minister announced that External Affairs would implement a new five-year plan "to expand and diversify Canada's cultural relations" and noted that, in addition to the United Kingdom, Canadian Studies abroad would embrace France, Japan, and the United States and in the following year would expand to Germany and Italy.

A few months earlier, in a memorandum sent to Patrick Reid, I referred to the new program as "a significant and potentially important dimension of the Canadian cultural projection." The memo states that the basic objectives were: "(1) to establish an expanding nucleus of influential persons, including educators, informed about and favourably disposed toward Canada; (2) to develop an awareness in the social sciences and humanities; (3) to provide a stimulus and network for more productive cross fertilization between Canada and academic communities abroad; (4) and by so doing, to facilitate the deepening and broadening of bilateral understanding within each country involved. We envisaged that these objectives would overlap and complement each other and that the program—and here I qualified it by saying "if it takes"—would seed itself. In other words, it would become largely self-supporting in financial terms. In 1975, this was dreaming in technicolour. But, to our astonishment, this is what happened.

The initiative was an almost immediate success.

A success, at minimal cost to the Canadian exchequer. The magic formula sustaining this 'cultural empire' was the fact that most expenses have been willingly borne by foreign universities. In addition, in some countries, foreign governments and the private sector helped to subsidize the programs. In good times, Canadian Studies Abroad works like a hybrid engine. Foreign universities, sometimes with help from their governments and the private sector, keep the batteries charged. But the gas, the Canadian federal input at the front end, is essential. It primes the pump.

I have said that the small scale of the funding from Ottawa is a surprising part of the program, but my homework for this paper reveals that there was more to this than I had realized.

While costs were to be kept down, the original plan was intentionally not rooted in moneymaking. The value to the country, to our profile, and to the enrichment of our universities and scientific establishments through steady cross fertilization is incalculable. By the nineties, with shrinking budgets for External Affairs and cost cutters roaming the Department looking for "soft" targets, cultural diplomacy was vulnerable—as obviously it still is. However, we naively assumed that a program that generated more income than costs would be safe. One result was that Brian Long, for many critical years the brilliantly enterprising Director of the Academic Relations Division, engaged experts to calculate any measureable returns from the program.

The results could not be accounted with precision, but calculations based on travels to Canada of students, professors, and accompanying family, purchases in Canada of books, subscriptions, and films, expenses of foreign students, and so forth suggested returns of at least $20 million per annum.

As Brian has written, the program generated thousands of scholarly books and articles in 21 languages, "facilitated the translation and publication of Canadian authors overseas and the sale of Canadian rights, books, films and microfilm." A further calculation indicated that the leveraging of non-government investment was "at the rate of $36 in programming for every dollar in expenditure"—meaning "$70 million injected into the Canadian economy every year"—an impressive and seemingly an invincible rationale for retaining and building the program.

Since its inception, the program has pushed far beyond the original plan to root it in the social sciences and humanities. Disciplines widened to include film, telecommunications, ethnic diversity, multiculturalism, the environment, and a galaxy of others with distinctive Canadian content. Success spawned copies. Australia and Japan modeled some of their programs on ours.

And for a short time, the top deck at External Affairs had received and acknowledged the message. In November 1979, in an address to the Association of Canadian Universities (AUCC), Allan Gotlieb, then Under Secretary at External Affairs, remarked that "Cultural diplomacy is the mortar with which the foundations of international diplomacy are made." And in the same speech, he noted that the effective promotion of Canada's cultural identity (is) not only a fundamental and inseparable aspect of Canadian foreign policy, but also that it paid demonstrable dividends in commercial terms."

From the start there has been a dynamic co-relation with the recruitment of foreign students for Canadian universities and colleges. Improved knowledge of Canada, its regions, and its intellectual resources have stimulated the flow of foreign students to Canada. Dividends from this asset continue to grow.

Another essential part of the success of the program can be traced back to the drafting board in the Academic Relations Division. In the first published account of the Canadian Studies program within External Affairs (*International Perspectives*, Sept/Oct 1976), we attempted to explain the importance of apolitical chastity in what we were doing. An element of the rationale was, of course, to correct grossly misleading perceptions about the Canadian identity. In Japan, our image was formed almost exclusively from the pages of *Anne of Green Gables*. The challenge was enormous, and some facilitative government role was indispensable. "The trick," I wrote at the time, was "to perform the role without allowing it to become a vehicle for selective government messages, or an expurgated image, thus undermining the credibility of the program. Once the facilitative role is effectively being played, the academic product must stand or fall on its own merits." In other words, it was about Canada 'warts and all'—not an instrument of propaganda—although we sometimes recklessly assumed that our warts would be overshadowed by our beauty spots.

The Report (in three volumes) of the Special Standing Committee on Foreign Policy, including dissenting opinions by the Bloc Québécois and the Reform Party, was released in November 1994. The government statement was tabled three months later. Included was a sentence that referred to "cultural diplomacy and learning abroad." It endorsed the vision of cultural diplomacy as one of the three pillars of Canadian foreign policy—meaning that the projection of Canadian values and culture stood on equal footing beside 'promoting prosperity and employment' and 'protecting our security within a stable global environment.' Halleluiah! . . . .But still no cigar.

Alas—a word I keep using—the knives were out again. Government expenditures were to be cut back and programs that were still clearly seen as frills in some quarters were vulnerable. Drastic cutbacks were in the works. Funding for the 1996–97 fiscal year for academic and international education programs was slashed.

On this occasion, people outside of foreign affairs were alarmed. By the fall of 1997, many in Ottawa had become concerned about "the visible wreckage of cultural diplomacy." I wrote afterwards, "Thwarted by his own senior management in his efforts to sustain the third pillar, Lloyd Axworthy (by then the minister) welcomed outside support." In January 1998, he created an academic advisory committee as a subcommittee to his Foreign Policy Advisory Committee.[4] This subcommittee was chaired by Lorna Marsden, president of York University. These pressures were joined informally by voices from the country's leading pan academic institutions (AUCC, Canadian Bureau for International Education, and the Royal Society of Canada). Axworthy was a believer. He is reported to have said that "he would not allow the main estimates to go forward unless the allocation for international education was reinstated."

Concern about the threats coupled with an understanding of the program values and objectives soon led to the formation of a consortium of non-governmental organizations that launched an 'International Learning Strategy for Canada.' The Third Pillar was beginning to inch off the ground again.

As they say in Spanish "Ojala!" If only!

The saga of Canadian Studies Abroad (also known as Understanding Canada) is longer and more serpentine than the few examples that I have cited. But somehow, if at times bruised and bleeding, it flourished. Until John Baird turned off the tap.

Without question, this is by far the most dangerous threat faced by the program. While it is extraordinary that so much of the program and so many of its members are still weathering the storm, attrition is taking its toll. Of the 28 national associations, only 17 are still more or less operational. Numbers, activities, academic programs, and academic outreach are inevitably in

decline. Money for research grants came largely from Ottawa and the absence of that funding has meant that it is almost impossible to recruit new faculty.

And for many foreign academics who sustain their interest and their attachment to Canadian scholarship, the sharpest blow for them has been the inexplicable rejection of the program by the Canadian government. A wound felt more deeply when they reflect that most of the program expenses are borne by their universities and not by the relatively paltry budget previously provided by Ottawa.

As you probably know, there is a campaign to persuade the government to restore funding. Strong support has been delivered from many sectors and individuals, but not sufficient as yet to win the day. Last year the campaign was revitalized when Nik Nanos (head of Nanos Research and Chair of the Carleton Board of Governors) agreed to take on its leadership. One of the most visible expressions of this campaign is the website www.advancingcanada.org. If you have not seen it, I encourage you to have a look—and sign on if you agree. It contains a letter to the Prime Minister making the case and setting out fresh ideas to invigorate the program. For example, a proposed new program would focus on the current world environment, would reposition the program from a more passive "Understanding Canada" to a more active "advancing Canada" and would include the promotion of collaborative scholarship with a new Canada-focused virtual think tank.

On the last page are the names of the coalition leaders of "Advancing Canada." They include: Margaret Atwood, Daniel Beland, Senator Peter Boehm, Robert Bothwell, Senator Patricia Bovey, Laura Dawson, John English, Louise Frechette, Alain Gagnon, Lawrence Hill, Margaret MacMillan, Nik Nanos, Chris Sands, and Jane Urquart.[5] An enterprising and absolutely key person in this ongoing campaign is your former president, Munroe Eagles.

The most recent significant development is the inclusion of Canadian Studies in the Report on Cultural Diplomacy released in June by the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade, into which we were able to have some quiet input. The Report, unanimously supported by the Senators, noted that Canadian Studies contributed to "substantial intellectual activity about Canada" and influenced "the position of foreign countries about Canada," concluding with the recommendation that "Global Affairs Canada support the creation of a modernized Canadian Studies program that would contribute to knowledge about Canada in the world." This recommendation would not have been in the report had it not been for the gentle persuasion of Senators Boehm and Bovey with the full support of the Committee chair, Senator Andreychuk.

There is one other bright spot on what has been a bumpy road over the past few years. And that is ACSUS. This conference, its attendance, and the span of its scholarship make clear that there is

no problem of failing vitality in ACSUS. That is very encouraging. Thank you for allowing me to be part of this celebration.

Conference Postscript, 22 November 2019

At the close of this paper, I speak enthusiastically about the vitality of the three-day ACSUS conference in Montréal. It was excellent in quality, organization, numbers, the warm welcome by the Government of Québec, and in location. However, it is essential to note that the glitter of success masks a major problem: a seriously weakened infrastructure that is the direct consequence of the loss of Canadian Government support. The absence of key research, travel grants, and other financial assistance has made it increasingly difficult (often impossible) to recruit new staff and thereby control attrition. Meanwhile, the Government of Québec maintains support for its extensive network of Québec Studies abroad.

[1] Stephen Brooks, ed. *Promoting Canadian Studies Abroad: Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy* (Springer 2019)

[2] The Symons Commission on Canadian Studies, including Canadian Studies abroad, was coincidentally in preparation at the same time. Although invited to do so, the Symons Commission was unwilling to make their research and recommendations available to us prior to formal publication of their report with the result that the External Affairs program with funding mechanisms and other operating procedures was launched without the benefit of the Symons Report. In the end, this was not a major handicap as our system and the Symons recommendations overlapped in important respects.

[3] The first incumbent was Professor Ian Drummond of the University of Toronto.

[4] Brian Stevenson, then on Axworthy's staff, was instrumental in persuading his minister to establish this sub-committee. Members were Lorna Marsden (Chair), Jan D'Arcy, John English, Gwyneth Evans, Robin Farquahar, John Graham, Ann Medina, and Jean Pigott.

[5] I am on it too.