

## Volume 25 Number 17 November 11, 2011

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#### Time for an independent science council

By Dr Yves Gingras

Anyone who talks about the "knowledge economy" will undoubtedly utter the word innovation. Governments are proud to showcase their "innovation strategies" and ministers are convinced that in our "global world" (another buzz phrase) no society can thrive without innovation.

Innovation, however, does not happen magically. It is the result of previous scientific research that often goes back decades. While incremental innovation can come easily from short-term R&D projects, radical innovation is difficult to predict and most often results from the unanticipated discoveries of curiosity-driven or loosely targeted research.

The connection between research and innovation is complex and unpredictable. If governments are serious about investing wisely and responsibly, they need to create institutional arrangements to ensure thought is given to identify long-term goals and direction. From the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s, the Science Council of Canada played that role as an independent body advising the government on future trends and needs in matters of science, technology and innovation. In 1968, just two years after its creation, the Science Council produced the landmark document *Towards a National Science Policy* that stimulated discussion on a then-new kind of policy initiative.

More than 25 years after its creation, the Science Council was closed in 1992, as was the Economic Council, under the Progressive Conservative government of Brian Mulroney during the neo-liberal vogue of deregulation and the pretext of "saving taxpayer money". This same superficial argument was used last year by the Quebec government to shut down the Quebec Science and Technology Council after 30 years of existence.

Both councils raised public awareness of important matters relating to science, technology and innovation. They helped their respective governments define policies that took into account the specificity of the research system. They also addressed the necessity of thinking beyond the short-term (3-4 years) horizon typical of politicians in order to address the inherently long-term strategies and priorities that scientific research needs if we want it to bear fruit.

To fill the vacuum it created, the Canadian government formed various advisory bodies, with no real independence of action, that gave only confidential advice to the minister of Industry. Being attached to the ministry meant they tended to be reformed frequently to fit new needs. As a result, few may remember the reports, either public or confidential, of the National Advisory Board on Science and Technology (NABST), Council of Science and Technology Advisors (CSTA) and Advisory Council on Science and Technology (ACST).

The Canadian Council of Academies arrived in 2006 to advise government on specific questions. In this case, the reports are made public but the mandate remains limited compared to that of the Science Council, which could also produce reports of its own on topics judged to be timely. Though governments do not like receiving reports and recommendations that could go against their latest pet policies, such arm's length reflections do serve the public interest by focusing scientific attention on important or controversial topics.

#### **CALLS FOR A NEW SCIENCE COUNCIL**

In this context, one should welcome recommendation 6.2 of the recent report by the Expert Panel mandated by the government to review Federal Support to Research and Development, chaired by Tom Jenkins. In addition to the more high profile recommendations on reforming the SR&ED tax credit and re-organizing the National Research Council, the report also calls on government to "transform the Science, Technology and Innovation Council (STIC) to become the government's external Innovation Advisory Committee (IAC), with a mandate to provide whole-of-government advice".

Though they use that magic word "innovation" (it pleases more than "science" these days), it is clear that this proposition includes basic research. The report effectively recommends re-creating a kind of Science Council, since the proposed IAC would have "two standing subcommittees: a Business Innovation Committee (BIC) and a Science and Research Committee (SRC)". Moreover, "unlike the STIC, whose policy advice is confidential, the new IAC's advice should be made public".

By recommending the reinstatement of an independent council with a mandate to provide whole-of-government advice, the Expert Panel confirms that such an advisory body is necessary to ensure public discussion as well as better decision-making in the medium- and long-term on R&D investment. This is something that has been sadly missing over the last decade.

Coming from a panel whose members include strong private sector representation, such a recommendation should be taken seriously. It serves as a reminder that one cannot optimize public investments without giving due consideration to the larger and changing global context in which science and technology evolve. And such serious thinking demands expertise, independence and time.

Far from costing money, such an arm's length organization can help save money by advising governments not to jump on any bandwagon that happens to come along, without first considering the possible unintended and long-term consequences. But that also supposes that future members of the proposed council are capable of independent thought and do not just repeat the most recent OECD report on the latest — and often short-lived — "best practice".

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