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Imagining Canada's Future: Presidential Address to the General Assembly

Annual General Meeting, March 23, 2013

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Bonjour chers collègues.

Good morning.

Je m'appelle Graham Carr, et je suis président (presque président sortant) de la Fédération canadienne des sciences humaines.

Je suis très heureux de vous accueillir, tous et toutes, ce matin (et de très bonne heure) ici à Ottawa.

Bienvenue à notre réunion 2013, le 17^e anniversaire de notre organisme.

I want to say how pleased we are to be here but also to acknowledge that we are meeting on the unceded land of the Algonquin nation.

We have planned an ambitious agenda for today:

- Engaged discussions about value of arts and SSH;
- A celebration of the best in scholarship;
- and, to begin, a 'State of the union' assessment for our Federation

All of this under the theme of Imagining Canada's Future.

I was going to start this speech by telling you that we in Canada are at a critical juncture for the arts, humanities and social sciences. That would be true. We are. This is an important moment in time. But I suspect the same thing could have been said by a Federation president five, ten or fifteen years ago, and it will be just as apt next year, the year after, and five, ten or fifteen years from now.

The paradox of academia and scholarship is that our work is meant to inspire originality, creativity, discoveries and breakthroughs. Our research and our students aim to enrich our critical understanding of, and improve the organization of society today, and to identify pathways for a brighter, sustainable future tomorrow. And yet our institutions, our learned societies, our forms of professional accreditation and behavior are often nervous about change, reluctant or unable to deliver on what's novel, what's daring, what's new. Sometimes when we in academia talk about being at a critical juncture the inflection in our discourse is



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essentially fearful and negative. We see trouble at the doorstep or looming dark and threatening on the horizon.

Plusieurs d'entre nous se sentent assiégés, mis sur la défensive par des administrations universitaires et des pouvoirs étatiques qui ne semblent pas apprécier à sa juste valeur le travail que nous accomplissons. Nous ressentons une incompréhension qui, ironiquement, est troublante, étant donné que la psychologie, les langues, le marketing et les communications font partie de nos disciplines.

To me the idea of a being at a critical juncture is not just about warding off danger. The essence of being at a crossroads is about taking stock, understanding our contributions both locally and globally, weighing the options, and deciding on a journey with a sense of purpose if not a final destination in mind.

Trois pistes de réflexion me viennent à l'esprit. J'aimerais les passer brièvement en revue avec vous, si vous me le permettez.

First, let's look across the horizon and take honest stock of the value that society places on post secondary education and research, on its willingness to invest in that enterprise, in particular as it concerns the liberal arts and social sciences.

Second, let's be alive to the fast-moving changes blowin' in the wind of education. They flow from new technologies, new forms of delivering teaching, training, learning and research, borderless realities, and the altered experiential and career expectations of our students and those who would employ them.

And third, as we pull up to this crossroads, let's ask how well customized the Federation is to take us down the pathway that best promotes the value of arts, humanities and social sciences.

Scanning the horizon

So let's begin by scanning the horizon, and honestly assessing the current public commitment to higher education and research in Canada. Let's admit that it's a challenge to be optimistic right now, that the university sector in virtually every jurisdiction is feeling bruised, battered and unloved. Unfortunately, we are living a painfully transformative moment in terms of public funding. In province after province, from Nova Scotia to British Columbia, in Quebec,



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prosperous Saskatchewan and even mighty Alberta, the news is dire. Universities are bleeding cuts whose true impact will be felt in years to come.

Everywhere, untouchable salaries and pension commitments make up the lion's share of institutional operating costs. In order to conform to new fiscal realities, it's inevitable that universities will have to be more selective in the scale and targeting of future hiring. They are scrutinizing existing program delivery for economies (and revenues). The arts, humanities and social sciences communities will no doubt feel vulnerable in this new reality, inevitably pressured to take on even larger classes to maintain some revenue equilibrium on campus. In this administrative context we need, urgently, to marshal our best arguments for success.

En outre, dans certaines provinces, y compris la mienne, le financement public de la recherche a aussi subi les contrecoups d'un contexte fiscal défavorable. C'est paradoxal, au moment même où les gouvernements clament l'importance de l'innovation, la créativité, la recherche et le développement. Il semble que les gouvernements ménagent la chèvre et le chou, parlant de croissance par l'innovation et la recherche d'une part, tout en imposant des mesures d'austérité et des compressions d'autre part. En même temps, l'imputabilité est plus que jamais de rigueur et à l'avant-plan. Je pense plutôt que le défi premier de notre communauté est d'être vigilant, créatif, convaincant, assidu et persévérant dans la valorisation et la promotion de ses contributions.

Here at the Federation, we have focused a lot of our attention year in and year out on funding for the Tri-Councils and CFI. That makes perfect sense: SSHRC, CIHR and CFI are critical to supporting leading edge research in our fields. But in making the case as best we could for the agencies, I think we have failed to articulate a second, complementary argument about the integrity and interdependence of larger knowledge ecosystem; one that sustains scholarship and training and involves other government agencies and institutions such as LAC, StatsCan, the Canada Council.

In this context it is welcome to learn that this week's federal budget re-invested the planned 7 million dollar cut to SSHRC and includes provisions for new investments in PSE aboriginal education, Mitacs, internships, and partnership opportunities for university research across multiple sectors of society and the economy.

Of course, everyone in the research community would prefer to see budget growth, and there is a particular and historical argument to be made for increments in SSHRC relative to the other agencies. But in the absence of more money we should not lose sight of the point that



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the recent budget recognizes that core funding to support leading edge research must be sustained. It is not a tap that can be turned off one year and on the next.

Quoiqu'il en soit, nous ne devons jamais prendre pour acquis l'appréciation que les gouvernements ont de nous. Nous avons besoin d'un discours cohérent, assidu et constructif, ciblant les élus et les décideurs à propos de notre rôle et de l'importance de notre apport. Parallèlement, nous devons comprendre le monde politique, et que notre valeur et notre crédibilité auprès des autorités gouvernementales sont conditionnées par la perception que le grand public, les médias d'influence, le secteur privé et le monde à buts non lucratif entretiennent à notre égard. En gros, il nous faut nous préoccuper de ce que les dirigeants et monsieur et madame tout le monde pensent de nous.

As far as I'm concerned we will always be a critical juncture in the court of public opinion and we should behave as such. What does this entail? As a community we need to step away from the podium occasionally and demonstrate that we can listen better. We need to become more attuned and responsive to public perceptions and expectations for universities and for the mission of higher education and research. Let's recognize that our disciplines are perceived in some quarters as peripheral to societal needs by comparison with commerce or STEM disciplines.

Who in this room hasn't taken offense at some point in the recent past when a columnist of op-ed writer has attacked, often sarcastically, the liberal arts as irrelevant to success in the contemporary world? Sadly, we often don't do a very compelling job answering these critiques or acknowledging that there could be benefits to reimagining what we do and how. And we don't do a very good job at lining up effective spokespeople such as our graduates, business leaders and others who see, and experience, the benefit of what we do. We often have the evidence to defend our worth, but the message is not sufficiently honed, direct, succinct.

In December I led a workshop of SSHRC leaders on the topic of advocacy. Some people who are here today participated. We did a simple exercise of splitting the room into groups and feeding each of them a challenging statement about the arts and social sciences: for example, [this quote from Louis Menand](#): *'Weirdly, the less social authority a profession enjoys, the more restrictive the barriers to entry and the more rigid the process of producing new producers tend to become. You can become a lawyer in three years, an M.D. in four years, and an M.D.-Ph.D. in six years, but the median time to a doctoral degree in the humanities disciplines is nine years.'* He makes a really good point. We should be able to address it. So we gave the



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participants 20 minutes to come up with a 30 second elevator pitch to respond to Menand's statement. Well it turned out the pitch would only work if the elevator was climbing a very tall building or got stuck en route to the top. Sometimes we aren't very adept or very nimble about explaining what we do. Let's see if people in this room will do better during our workshop later this morning.

We also need to accept that it isn't just the barbs from the journalists or certain elements of the business community that we need to fend off. Many of the most probing and difficult questions about our disciplines are being posed by our own students, or prospective students, who aren't sold on the idea that we are preparing them, nurturing their talents, for the opportunities they crave or the careers they want.

La semaine dernière j'ai pris part à une défense de thèse à mon département - l'Histoire. Le candidat, un jeune francophone venu à Concordia pour y compléter des études de doctorat, incarne parfaitement notre idéal de succès. Il a complété ses études avec succès, a maîtrisé l'anglais et appris l'irlandais, a fait son travail de recherche et complété sa thèse en moins de cinq ans! Malheureusement, l'échec semble être au rendez-vous en fin de parcours, car il n'existe aucun débouché pour lui en ce moment. Notre jeune homme a tout fait selon les règles. Nous ressentions de la sympathie à son égard et de la frustration face à l'injustice des circonstances. Le silence se fit lourd lorsque j'ai suggéré que notre programme en était peut-être la cause, du moins en partie, puisque ce programme est fondé sur un modèle traditionnel une qui ne tient pas compte des réalités du marché. Nous avons choisi d'interpréter la situation en termes d'offre et de demande au sein d'un unique marché: le monde universitaire. Et pourquoi aurions-nous fait autrement? La plupart d'entre nous s'en est bien sortie de cette manière n'est-ce pas?

But supposing the problem is one of undersupply: that other markets would love to have access to our best and brightest, particularly if the training they received could be reconceived and realigned. A week doesn't go by without a call to reform the PhD in arts and humanities, to promote more transdisciplinary fertilization, professional skills development in areas like project management, greater experiential breadth and global mobility, or internships in humanities-friendly industries, such as games or design companies. There are hugely creative opportunities to make a critical turn here. And we should quickly turn in that direction before the road disappears altogether. However much some members of our community are skeptical about the emerging (industry and public sector) partnership grant opportunities through SSHRC, I have a different view. Grants like these open new and sometimes



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unexpected opportunities. They give our researchers and our best students access to worlds, to organizations, to equipment and data sets, to habits of mind that they might not otherwise encounter. They create conditions of convergence, *une confluence d'intérêts et de créativité*. And eventually they may help us refashion the nature of the training we give our students. Rather than compromising their inspiration, their critical, research and communication skills we should reframe those talents to capture an expanded range of possibilities.

Open, online and global

The second broad point I want to make is that there is quite a traffic jam at the crossroads. In Canada, our PSE sector has grown by leaps and bounds. There are more than 80 universities and nearly 130 colleges or Cegeps across Canada ranging enormously in size (from fewer than 1000, to nearly 100,000 in the case of multi-campus UofT). Together, they provide a diverse and rich array of educational pathways and research opportunities to a growing number of Canadians. For me, the debate should never be of universities vs colleges but of the PSE sector working together more effectively to provide real educational choices in all their complexity that foster a spirit of inquiry, imagination, discovery and collaboration.

As we converge in haste at these crossroads it's apparent that we are living another kind of transformative moment featuring startling new technology-centered models of teaching and learning. Of course I'm referring to MOOCs and Ed-X and Coursera and the plethora of blended and online learning tools developed, or in development, at universities across the continent. Although there is much hype and skepticism around these projects, there is no denying that these tools have the potential to revolutionize access to knowledge, transform the commons of learning, revolutionize the business model of education, and produce new conditions of institutional competition for students, faculty, and reputation. Disciplines that can adapt and respond well to such pressures will thrive; others, that remain hidebound by traditional forms may not.

Quand on pense à toutes ces innovations en ligne, instinctivement, nous vient à l'esprit l'Amérique du Nord. Cependant, il se trouve que ce virage colossal amorcé en enseignement supérieur repose en partie sur la mondialisation et la mobilité étudiante, et la distincte possibilité que cette mobilité se fasse dans toutes les directions possibles, suite à l'éveil de la Chine, de Singapour, de la Malaisie, de Hong Kong, de l'Indie, et plus récemment de l'Amérique du Sud. De nouvelles et grandes universités sont en émergence à travers le monde. Bien qu'elles n'en soient qu'à leur début, et souvent spécialisées dans l'enseignement de disciplines STEM, il ne faut pas sous-estimer leur impact et leur influence sur



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l'établissement des priorités de recherche, de recrutement et de classement en Amérique du Nord. Plus important encore, nous devrions nous demander en quoi l'internationalisation de l'enseignement supérieur, particulièrement dans les sociétés non-occidentales, peut changer la mission de l'enseignement et de la recherche dans les arts, les sciences sociales et les humanités? Lié à ceci, comment ce fait-il que nous accusions des retards face à d'autres domaines en termes de participation à des projets de recherche véritablement internationaux, et ce quand nous comptons parmi nos propres disciplines celles qui comprennent et savent comment interagir avec d'autres cultures? Again this development is not necessarily negative as we witnessed at a recent Canada-China symposium at Mount Allison to strengthen collaboration in improving liberal arts education in China and in better appreciating the strengths and weaknesses of our own system.

And then there is the issue that technology and the growing complexity of research activity also create a new need and opportunities to capture, share and archive data. Of course, the 'big data' drivers are in fields like genomics, environmental and medical research. But we have an impressive national culture of digital humanities and we need to ensure that the arts, humanities and social sciences are well represented in any discussions about major investment in data architecture going forward.

As we wrestle with these imponderable changes, and contemplate which direction forward, the real question we need to be asking is not about which road is the safest to protect our interests, but where is the opportunity for the arts, humanities and social sciences to get out in front, to lead?

The role of the Federation

Notre Fédération est-elle bien équipée pour relever ces défis, où pour faciliter le dialogue et l'implication des nos membres afin d'identifier et d'évaluer les meilleures pistes à suivre?

Nous avons adopté il y a deux ans un plan stratégique, dont la pièce maîtresse est de croître la visibilité de la Fédération et d'impliquer davantage nos membres. Nous pouvons déjà voir et apprécier les progrès notables réalisés jusqu'à maintenant.

We have transformed our virtual presence with a new website, built around the concept IdeasCan/*Les Idées peuvent*, and have ignited a dramatic rise in social media coverage for Congress and other events.



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We are on the cusp of a major governance reform that will make our organization more nimble and ensure that its leadership is fully engaged on the state of learning and research. Later today, the AGM will be invited to ratify our new bylaws.

I leave my position as president knowing that we have a stronger governance structure better able to address the complex issues regarding the relevance and reach of scholarship from our community. We now enjoy a healthy financial situation and a set of program and advocacy activities that better meet the needs of our members and contribute towards the public good. And, best of all, I have a great successor, Antonia Maioni, who is more than capable of leading this organization to great things in the future.

Conclusion

In closing, part of what I am asking us to do is to imagine the role the Federation can play, must play, in Imagining Canada's Future/ A future that cannot be fully realized until we learn how to grapple with the rapidly changing forms of our teaching and expectations to deliver new forms of training, and open ourselves fully to explore new vistas of research.

We occupy a privileged position in the academy, where we have the opportunity and indeed the duty to challenge our students, to foster their engagement with society, and to be directly engaged ourselves through our research and collaboration.

At this juncture we in the arts, humanities and social sciences need to assume our proper role both in Imagining Canada's Future, and in delivering the great ideas, the evidence-based research, and the creative talent to realize our potential.