



## **Brief to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance**

Mobilizing the Humanities and Social Sciences to Canada's Advantage

*2008 Federal Pre-Budget Consultations*

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Recommendation:

**That the Government of Canada, as an integral part of its Science and Technology Strategy, increase non-targeted research funding to the Social Science and Humanities Research Council by amounts beyond the level of inflation to complement the targeted funding increases**

## **Mobilizing the Humanities and Social Sciences to Canada's Advantage**

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The government's 2007 "Mobilizing Science and Technology to Canada's Advantage" is the strategy by which funding decisions for research and post-secondary education in Canada are made. It is quite striking to note that the humanities and social sciences are largely unmentioned in the document. Yet, the strategy itself could not even begin to exist without the underpinning of various SSH disciplines. Our goal with this brief is to make this underpinning explicit. The social sciences and humanities have been compared in the past to the air around us: invisible, essential and so ubiquitous that we seldom stop to think about its importance, until it is removed. Investing in the humanities and social sciences is crucial to the success of the Science and Technology strategy, and to Canada's economy and social success.

### **1. Entrepreneurial advantage of H&SS**

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The government's strategy for science and technology rests on a regulatory, financial and policy framework to encourage and stimulate a competitive marketplace and facilitate the world-class research that will situate Canadian businesses and products as leaders in the global economy. This pillar is based on knowledge gained through the humanities and social sciences. Establishing an effective framework for nurturing the Canadian economy depends on research conducted by universities, institutions and government departments. As our understanding of the issues grows and evolves, so too does our understanding of best practices and the most effective frameworks to guide policy decisions.

Beyond their contributions to policy and governance activities, the humanities and social sciences play a crucial role in cultural, social and economic issues. According to a recent study, the majority of humanities and social sciences commercial outputs take the form of services, such as: consultancies; education and training in universities, government and industry; contract research; productions and publications, and research into commercialization pathways (Gascoigne, 12-13). The prime beneficiaries of these services are government, and the general public through NGOs and community groups. As the study notes, "the benefits of commercialization are reported as wide and varied. Commercial work enables researchers to improve their teaching and research as it gives them a better understanding of the needs of industry. It provides students with exposure to industry practice and research experience" (Gascoigne, 5).

Humanities and social sciences play an integral role in improving knowledge transfer from funded research to knowledge users. A report on the impact of UK Research Councils funding notes that "...in certain areas of the economy, especially the creative and financial services, innovation is increasingly driven by the interaction between technology and people" (Warry, 6). Innovation is, of course, significantly informed by new technologies, new forms of dissemination and communication. Advances in such technologies now "make interaction among researchers unconstrained -- and instantaneous" (Nowotny et al, 187). Indeed, the recent shift from highly specialized cells of interaction to research communities with open frontiers has invited new kinds of 'knowledge' organizations, such as think-tanks, consultants, community groups, activists, and web-based scholarly clusters. In other words, "research is increasingly 'trans-disciplinary,' by which is meant the

mobilization of a range of theoretical perspectives and practical methodologies to solve problems” (Nowotny et al, 186). In this emerging and dynamic environment, “knowledge also needs to be ‘socially robust’, because its validity is no longer determined solely, or predominantly, by narrowly circumscribed scientific communities, but by much wider communities of engagement comprising knowledge producers, disseminators, traders, and users” (Nowotny et al, 191-192).

Ultimately, humanities and social sciences research must be understood not as separate, irrelevant spheres of knowledge production but as intimately integrated with science and technology, even foundationally necessary for advancing knowledge and solving problems. Investment in untargeted research fully appreciates this reality.

## **2. Knowledge advantage of H&SS**

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Along with supporting basic research, the government is placing special emphasis on areas of Canada’s public research base which it can lever “to address social and economic challenges and maximize our competitive advantage,” specifically environmental science and technologies, natural resources and energy, health and related life sciences and technologies, and information and communications technologies (Canada, 63). The government has also flagged support for “multidisciplinary research that brings together expertise from diverse fields, including natural sciences and engineering, social sciences and humanities, and health sciences” (Canada, 64) through the granting councils and agencies such as the Canada Foundation for Innovation.

While governments around the world routinely set funding priorities that govern spending in the short term, it is also imperative that they invest overwhelmingly in basic research – with beneficial and unforeseen returns in the long term. As Dr. Eliot Phillipson, the President of the Canada Foundation for Innovation, pointed out to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology,

It is largely the responsibility of government--that is, the public sector--to invest in the very basic fundamental research simply because it is so far upstream that the potentially commercial products simply cannot be predicted. No one could have predicted all of the commercial benefits that would have resulted from Einstein’s fundamental research, yet nobody today would deny it. But at the time, no one, including Einstein himself, could have predicted it. So that generally is a role for the public sector, for government. (House of Commons, 2008)

David Naylor, the President of the University of Toronto, presses the point in *The Globe and Mail*: “The next generation of creative minds and novel products will come from basic research environments, not by pressing universities to focus on industry’s current needs” (Globe and Mail, A13, July 24, 2008).

Mobilizing the humanities and social sciences to Canada’s advantage means supporting the full spectrum of basic research. Targeted research prescribes assumed areas of special urgency or social need, but it ignores the reality of new and exciting forms of social sciences and humanities research practices, and especially how these practices are making significant contributions to our knowledge society. “We now speak of ‘context-driven’ research, meaning ‘research carried out in a context of application, arising from the very work of problem solving and not governed by the paradigms of traditional disciplines of knowledge” (Gibbons et al, 4). Social sciences and humanities research is increasingly diverse and heterogeneous, extending beyond traditional boundaries to inform the discourses of science and technology, to broaden the context by which we understand problems and take on new challenges.

Consider how industries create or improve products or processes through knowledge gained from social sciences and humanities. These industries include: retail; finance, real estate, and insurance; educational services; health care and social assistance; arts, entertainment and recreation; accommodation, food services; tourism; and public administration. Outputs from service industries account for nearly \$818.9 billion of Canada's GDP in 2006 – 68% of Canada's economy (Freedman).

Employment is another way of measuring the contribution of the humanities and social sciences to the social economy. Specifically, we can measure the extent to which industries in Canada benefit from employees with humanities and social sciences skills. These skills are especially required in science, technology, engineering and medicine, where knowledge of ethics and moral philosophy is critical, as recent catastrophes resulting from narrow thinking or uninformed medical-organizational practices clearly demonstrate. Consider, as well, the critical importance of literacy and language acquisition in a rapidly multicultural world, one that also depends on respect for and understanding of aboriginal peoples and the inevitable development of vast expanses of the Canadian north. Humanities and social sciences must be harnessed to ensure robust and sustainable social and economic growth.

Writing of the vital role of humanities research, in particular, Wilfred M. McClay writes that

rightly pursued and rightly ordered, [it] can do things, and teach things, and preserve things, and illuminate things, which can be accomplished in no other way. It is the humanities that instruct us in the range and depth of human possibility, including our immense capacity for both goodness and depravity. It is the humanities that nourish and sustain our shared memories, and connect us with our civilization's past and with those who have come before us. It is the humanities that teach us how to ask what the good life is for us humans, and guide us in the search for civic ideals and institutions that will make the good life possible.

The humanities are imprecise by their very nature. But that does not mean they are a form of intellectual finger-painting. The knowledge they convey is not a rough, preliminary substitute for what psychology, chemistry, molecular biology, and physics will eventually resolve with greater finality. They are an accurate reflection of the subject they treat, the most accurate possible. In the long run, we cannot do without them (The Burden of the Humanities, [http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=wq.essay&essay\\_id=452772](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=wq.essay&essay_id=452772)).

The humanities and social sciences not only play an integral part in the development and advancement of the knowledge economy but they inflect that economy with shared and necessary values, "as we move closer to the technologies of a posthuman future, a strange, half-lit frontier in which bioengineering and pharmacology may combine to make all the fearsome transgressions of the past into the iron cages of the future, and leave the human image permanently altered" (McClay).

### **3. People advantage of H&SS**

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If knowledge is a key factor of competitiveness in an economy based on information, then a worker's training, ability to think and analyze, and experience become crucially important. Individuals must learn throughout life, adapting to new information and learning new skills, and universities and university colleges are where most of this learning takes place.

Research conducted at the university level is crucial for this development of knowledge and skills. Studies have shown that cutting edge research improves the quality of knowledge and skills transmission provided by professors, particularly to undergraduate students (CPA, 2). This cutting edge research "brings a freshness and vitality to the educational process that would not otherwise be present. It also brings the most up-to-date knowledge to the classroom and laboratory. The active

pushing of the limits of knowledge and the questioning of reality in an evidence-based manner inculcate skills and values that are indispensable in later life" (CPA, 1). Inherent in humanities and social sciences research is a reflexive, interrogating practice, one that moves beyond received truths towards a more complex, multifaceted understanding and appreciation of nature.

Funding untargeted research conducted at the post secondary level assures the future stream of professors needed to educate the next generation of highly qualified personnel. Industry, business, government and academia depend upon universities to supply an educated workforce from across the disciplinary spectrum. They depend especially upon faculty in the human sciences who train the majority of university graduates. In 2004, almost 67% of all students, that is 114,628 undergraduates and 24,039 graduate students, earned degrees in the humanities and social sciences (CAUT, 2007). These acquired skills are recognized as the single greatest driver of knowledge transfer from research to commercial applications. "Intellectual capability and creativity is a fundamental part of this. It is created by having Universities that are at the cutting edge of international research and by having a strong stream of graduate and PhD students flowing from these Universities into industry and commerce" (Warry, 6).

The government benefits on a daily basis from the ongoing pursuit of knowledge in the humanities and social sciences, as it works to advance the interests of Canadians in a multitude of fields, and improve their quality of life. Both the federal government and private businesses place a high value on skills gained through a liberal arts education. Canada's Clerk of the Privy Council says,

What we need are young people who are thinking about the world, who have developed the capacity to analyze critically, to communicate clearly and to learn continually; and who want to make a difference to their country. The interesting thing is that these same skills are prized in the private sector as well. A few years ago, CEOs of some of Canada's leading high tech companies took the unprecedented step of issuing a public statement in support of a liberal arts education. That statement said in part, and I quote, "a liberal arts education nurtures skills and talents increasingly valued by modern corporations" (Lynch, 2008).

The research that flows from such a liberal arts education, especially as practiced at our post secondary institutions, is increasingly trans-disciplinary, creative and dynamic in its methodologies and in its applications. It is open and experimental, and it seeks to gather communities of scholars together to help solve complex problems. Indeed, as society becomes more complex and more sophisticated, it will require a denser, richer, and more integrated dialogue with a much wider range of researchers than it has in the past. The result is what is known as "a socially distributed knowledge production system" (Gibbons et al), a system that includes and values humanities and social sciences researchers as much as it does scientists. One could argue, as others have, that the humanities, as arguably the most traditionally "detached" of all spheres, is, in fact, the most engaged, because the work of humanities scholars not only flows through the cultural industries (through novels, film, and popular history), but also embodies a healthy, necessary scepticism of a monolithic view of the world.

In addition to developing the knowledge and skills needed to compete in today's knowledge-economy, developing a civil society is also considered a part of the wealth of a nation. A study conducted by the World Bank in 2006 notes that: "...the preponderant form of wealth worldwide is intangible capital—human capital and the quality of formal and informal institutions...rich countries are largely rich because of the skills of their populations and the quality of the institutions supporting economic activity" (World Bank, XIV). And further, "...intangible assets include the skills and know-how embodied in the labor (sic) force", and "...social capital, that is, the trust among people in a society and their ability to work together for a common purpose" (World Bank, XIV).

Social capital is a concept rooted squarely in the humanities and social sciences. As Dr. Martha Piper pointed out in her Killam Address in 2002, "We cannot truly achieve the ideal of a civil society until we possess the kind of deep, extensive knowledge born of research that would enable us to better understand ourselves, identify our values, define the problems, apply the solutions, and construct the prosperous and humane society we all seem to aspire to." Ultimately, as McClay argues, "we need the humanities in order to understand more fully what it means to be human, and to permit that knowledge to shape and nourish the way we live." We ignore the research of the social sciences and humanities at our peril.

## 6. Conclusion

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The federal government has quite rightly recognized the advantages that can be created by encouraging an environment in which innovation can flourish. Canada's economic and social future relies as much on its human sciences as it does on its natural, engineering and health sciences. Success involves human potential and human excellence, and development of skills and knowledge founded in the humanities and social sciences is crucial for Canada's success. By investing in targeted research, the government has indicated areas of research in need of immediate attention, and for which immediate return on investment is expected. To complement this strategy, we urge the government to champion basic research just as forcefully, as it forms the backbone of Canada's innovative potential in the future.

The Federation therefore recommends that:

**the Government of Canada increase non-targeted research funding to the Social Science and Humanities Research Council by amounts beyond the level of inflation to complement the targeted funding increases as part of Canada's Science and Technology Strategy.**

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