

The ongoing crisis of Canadian Studies

It is difficult to see Canadian Studies as a victim of its own success when one observer noted that most programs existed in an atmosphere of “unloved obscurity”¹ and the dean of Canadian Studies, T.H. Symons, described it as a discipline in a “holding pattern” and *de facto* decline.² Like the country it studies, the discipline has changed considerably over the years. However, change does not mean success. Not only does the discipline still need to address historic challenges: new threats are on the horizon.

CANADIAN STUDIES SUCCESSES

The most notable change since the seminal report *To Know Ourselves*³ is a much stronger sense of national identity, at least in English Canada. Young Canadians, the children of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, are fiercely and confidently Canadian, do not want Canada to become more like the United States, and embrace and celebrate diversity.⁴ This occasionally (with the help of the courts) forces governments to go beyond the rhetorical celebration of a distinct Canada and implement changes that reflect the desires of Canadians. The long battle to achieve equal marriage rights for gay and lesbian Canadians is a prime example.

The ongoing success of several small but flourishing centres of Canadian Studies across the country reflects the fact that young Canadians want to know more about their country. The graduate program at the School of Canadian Studies at Carleton, which was the university’s first graduate program, is celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2007. The Carleton-Trent joint PhD program in Canadian Studies symbolizes the academic maturity of the discipline.

This is the major success of the Canadianization movement—a growing Canadian presence in our universities and a methodology for explaining an ever-

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changing country. The academic rigour of Canadianists, both in Canada and abroad, is impressive. Contemporary scholarship, in accordance with Symons’ view that Canadian Studies should help us understand—and not celebrate—Canada, is impressive. Canadianists have responded to the challenge laid out by Robert Campbell⁵ that the core mythologies that inform the Canadian identity must be examined critically, for they often do not reflect the Canadian reality.

MUST NATIONAL IDENTITY BE HOMOGENEOUS?

So why am I concerned? First, the strong sense of national identity, rooted in diversity, is too often conflated with a homogeneous national identity. While we *celebrate* diversity as a core Canadian value, governments and individuals display considerably less desire to *practise*

diversity. Polls show that official bilingualism is unpopular, and there are low levels of support for the institutional recognition of Québécois distinctiveness; despite official multiculturalism, there remains unease about immigration and the integration of immigrants into Canada; and despite recognition of historical wrongs, there is less appetite to address the concerns of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. The Leger Marketing report⁶ on racial intolerance is a sobering reminder that discrimination is an ongoing reality of Canada, challenging the core values of the Canadian identity.

Growing up in the post-Charter idealized Canada, it can be difficult for young Canadians to appreciate how the country has changed and the issues that continue to challenge the country. Too often, issues like racism or gender inequality are simply seen as part of the past. My experiences in the classroom reveal that there is a thirst for knowledge about Canada. However, while some students are surprised to discover that Canada often does not live up to its ideals, they are uncomfortable with a critical analysis of Canada, equating it with negative criticism.

UNCritical PATRIOTISM

The rise of Canadian Studies, and the work of groups like the Dominion Institute, has not increased the self-knowledge of Canadians; indeed, Canadians appear to know less about their country than Americans do about theirs.⁷ Despite higher levels of education, low levels of civic literacy are moving youth away from traditional forms of nationalism and making them more conservative.⁸ There is no doubt a connection to a disengagement from politics and lower rates of participation,⁹ as politics becomes less of an avenue for addressing social change. Some young Canadians, like a significant minority of American students, appear to be “uncritical patriots”

who accept articulated senses of identity and refuse to question or to accept criticism of their country. This is linked to a lack of political involvement and low levels of political knowledge.¹⁰

This uncritical patriotism lets our politicians off the hook. It becomes easier to articulate Canadian distinctiveness rather than invest in those public policies and programs, reflective of the desire of Canadians, that make Canada distinct. “Brand politics” celebrating Canada thus contributes to the paradoxical nature of the Canadian identity: the need to proclaim difference while Canadian society becomes less distinctive. Consequently, Canada experiences numerous rhetoric–reality gaps between articulated ideals and actual experiences.¹¹ It suggests that one of the driving characteristics of the Canadian Studies enterprise, namely, its activist nature, has not been fully realized.

This points to the need for a strengthened Canadian Studies enterprise; however, the discipline remains under attack in universities and poorly supported in the kindergarten, primary, and secondary school systems. This makes it more difficult to increase young Canadians’ knowledge of Canada. In Ontario, for example, Canadian Studies is not a “teachable” subject for students attending teacher’s college. We are therefore directly undermining our efforts to have young people learn more about Canada, as students interested in teaching shy away from Canadian Studies. This reduces the number of people who can teach Canada in a complex manner to young people and promotes uncritical patriotism.

SCARCE RESOURCES

Meanwhile, Canadian Studies university programs are small, lack dedicated faculty and resources, and, in the battle for scarce resources, remain under threat. Administrators must choose between yielding to fiscal pressures and supporting an important yet increasingly marginalized discipline. Universities historically supported programs despite small numbers because they accepted the argu-

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ment that a unique discipline was needed to explain Canada. However, will this continue in an era of tight budgets? For example, when the University of Alberta proposed closing its Canadian Studies program in 2001, this reasoning was turned on its head, as the dean of Arts noted that students could learn about Canada in many other disciplines.¹²

And what about students? Will graduates of the Carleton-Trent doctoral program, a success story to be sure, be able to secure academic employment? With few Canadian Studies positions in Canadian universities, academic job prospects are bleak. Will university departments organized along traditional disciplinary lines be willing to hire those with newly minted doctorates in an interdisciplinary field?

Given the lack of a national learned association for Canadian Studies, Canadianists (mostly trained in the traditional disciplines) still need to work in their old fields if they wish to do academic work in Canada.¹³ This absence has increased the importance of the international Canadian Studies community. The federal Canadian Studies program stimulated the international blossoming of the discipline and has been a salvation for Canadianists in Canada.¹⁴

LINKING CANADIAN STUDIES RESEARCH TO GOVERNMENT PRIORITIES

However, this program is now undergoing a review, with a proposal that funding for Canadian Studies activities abroad be

more closely linked to government priorities.¹⁵ While the program review states that non-strategic areas relating to culture should not feel threatened, one may ask why it is necessary to prioritize areas of study that correlate to government priorities. Perhaps this is a battle of bureaucratic self-preservation, sending signals to government decision makers that the program is a worthy investment.

If implemented, the proposal would disrupt the delicate balance between academic freedom and government support for broad public diplomacy efforts. This makes international scholars and their associations an unwilling tool of Canadian foreign policy, as their work would be funded according to criteria aimed at promoting Canadian interests first, not advancing scholarship. Indeed, the South African Association of Canadian Studies (2007) stated that “the detailed policy priorities, as described, would tie us to Canadian foreign policy in a way that would be unacceptable; endanger our position as an independent academic body; and implicitly compel us to adopt priorities which we do not share.”¹⁶

International Canadian Studies associations are quite dependent on Canadian federal government support. The proposal jeopardizes programs and risks diminishing interest from scholars outside of the strategic areas, since many international Canadianists study arts and culture. Moreover, many scholars interested in Canada lack institutional support

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and if funding from Canada is less readily available, then such scholars may stop studying or teaching Canada. The reorientation could actually undermine the government's efforts to create a positive image of Canada.

So where does this leave Canadian Studies? There is little domestic support from the federal and provincial governments. Universities are at best indifferent. Internationally, the discipline will suffer a major blow if the strategic orientation is adopted. Can a renewed sense of national pride and identity and a rhetoric of distinctiveness supplant the ongoing precarious support for a discipline that explores and explains a constantly changing country? Unfortunately, the prognosis does not look good, unless action is taken. ❁

Notes:

1. David Cameron, *Taking Stock: Canadian Studies in the Nineties* (Montreal: Association for Canadian Studies, 1996).
2. T.H.B. Symons, "The State of Canadian Studies at the Year 2000: Some Observations," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 35:1 (2000), pp. 27-51, especially p. 28.
3. T.H.B. Symons, *To Know Ourselves: The Report of the Commission on Canadian Studies* (Ottawa: Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 1975).
4. See Erin Anderssen and Michael Valpy, *The New Canada: A Globe and Mail Report on the Next Generation* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2004); Andrew Parkin and Matthew Mendelsohn, *A New Canada: An Identity Shaped by Diversity* (Montreal: Centre for Research and Information on Canada, 2003).
5. Robert Campbell, "Canadian Studies at the Millennium: The Journey Continues," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 35:1 (2000), pp. 5-26.
6. Leger Marketing, *Sun Media Racial Intolerance Report*. Available from www.leger-marketing.com/documents/spclm/070119ENG.pdf (accessed 27 April 2007).
7. Darrell Bricker and John Wright, *What Canadians Think About Almost Every-*

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thing (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2005), pp. 306-308.

8. Robert Wright, *Virtual Sovereignty: Nationalism, Culture and the Canadian Question* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2004), especially chapters 6 and 7.
9. Elections Canada, *Electoral Insight*, 5:2 (2003) (special issue on "Youth Participation in Elections"); Frank Graves, *Identity, Globalization and North American Integration: Canada at the Crossroads* (Address to the Canadian Club, 16 January 2001). Available from www.ekos.com/admin/articles/cdnclub.pdf (accessed 27 April 2007).
10. Leonie Huddy and Nadia Khatib, "American Patriotism, National Identity, and Political Involvement," *American Journal of Political Science*, 51:1 (2007), pp. 63-77.
11. Richard Nimijean, "The Paradoxical Nature of the Canadian Identity," *Teaching Canada*, 23 (2005), pp. 25-31; "Brand Canada: The Brand State and the Decline of the Liberal Party," *Inroads*, 19 (2006), pp. 84-93; "The Politics of Branding Canada: The International-Domestic Nexus and the Rethinking of Canada's Place in the World," *Mexican Journal of Canadian Studies*, 11 (2006), pp. 67-85; "Articulating the 'Canadian Way': Canada™ and the Political Manipulation of the Canadian Identity," *British Journal of Canadian Studies* (forthcoming).
12. Geoff McMaster, "The Demise of Canadian Studies," *Expressnews*, 26 March 2001. Available from www.ualberta.ca (accessed 18 May 2007).
13. There will be a national Canadian Studies conference in the fall of 2007, but it remains to be seen if it will become a regular event or if a national academic association will be formed.
14. The Canadian Studies program directly and indirectly allows Canadianists (myself included) to work with international Canadianists. This increases scholarship on Canada from a variety of perspectives and reinforces Canada's democratic credentials when critics of government policy are supported.
15. Details of the program review are available from the International Council for Canadian Studies website at www.iccs-ciec.ca/forum/index.htm (accessed 11 September 2007).
16. South African Association of Canadian Studies, submission to the review of the Canadian Studies Program, 2007. Available from the International Council for Canadian Studies website at www.iccs-ciec.ca/forum/SAACS%20letter%20to%20ICCS.pdf (accessed 21 May 2007).

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