



# The challenging times for Canadian Studies

BY COLIN M. COATES

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Colin M. Coates is a professor in the Canadian Studies program at Glendon College and was director of the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies from 2011 to 2015.

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The last few decades have not been kind to units connected to area studies, and Canadian Studies programs and research units have faced a variety of intellectual and practical challenges. A key moment occurred in 2012 with the withdrawal of federal government funds, which had been channelled through what was then called the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (now Global Affairs Canada) to international Canadian Studies and research units. The Conservative government of Stephen Harper, which was undertaking a wide range of program reviews and implementing cost-cutting measures in many departments, cancelled the “Understanding Canada” program entirely. Even though it had been arguably an extremely effective and cost-efficient program, which, at rather modest cost, encouraged teaching and research on Canadian subjects in universities around the world, any political party can make the argument fairly easily that there are few votes to be won in funding scholars outside the country.

## “IF STEPHEN HARPER DOESN’T SUPPORT CANADIAN STUDIES, WHY SHOULD WE?”

It was not long before institutions like Duke University closed its Canadian Studies program, arguing, as the then vice provost did, “If Stephen Harper doesn’t support Canadian Studies, why should we?” To take another example with which I am more closely acquainted, at the peak of the Canadian Studies presence in the United Kingdom in the late 1990s, there were perhaps seven full-time academics throughout the country who were hired because of their Canadian expertise. (Of course, there were many more British academics who taught individual courses that dealt at least in part with Canada and whose research agenda included Canadian topics.) Today, in the United Kingdom, I can identify only one or two such positions. In comparison, the Polish Language and Literature program at the University of Toronto has three professors. Eight years into a Liberal government, there has been no significant change in policy to support Canadianist research and teaching outside Canada.

Despite the withdrawal of federal government support for Canadian Studies, some of the older and larger associations of Canadian Studies in Europe and Asia have continued to pursue their academic goals, although the decision to cut support has hamstrung efforts to encourage scholars in areas like Latin America. At the same time, the withdrawal of federal funding sent an unfortunate message that the Canadian government did not support teaching and research units labelled “Canadian Studies” within Canada as well. The fact that federal government money did not directly fund these programs and units was irrelevant.

Such programs within Canada had come into existence for two main reasons: first, to ensure that Canadian topics occupied a place on the academic agenda (which was not common in universities in anglophone Canada about 50 years ago), and second, to encourage interdisciplinary perspectives on

the country. Given the general shift in many universities away from traditional disciplines and toward multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches, one might be mistaken for thinking that Canadian Studies would be well placed to ride this wave, just as, in its own small way, it had contributed to it in the first place. But the flexibility and fluidity of area studies approaches have also come under attack from certain quarters that decry the attention that some of the scholars involved in such endeavours pay to critical theory.

A second challenge to Canadian Studies has been the academic critique of the nation-state. Where at one point many scholars believed that it was important to explore some topics in a specifically nation-bound framework—for instance, in a “Themes in Canadian Literature” course—scholars and students have responded positively to other, entirely justifiable approaches (based on gender, sexuality, post-colonialism, and Indigeneity, for instance) that do not depend on the nation-state or a region for definition. History and political science courses have tended to maintain their geographical focus, given the concentration on state-defined issues in both disciplines. But even in Canadian history, to take one example, the challenge of the Indigenous experience of the nation-state, which runs counter in so many ways to the experience of settler-colonial Canadians, has led scholars to reconsider long-established beliefs about the country. This is not, in itself, an entirely new phenomenon, since interpretations in all social science and humanities disciplines have continued to evolve depending on current historical contexts. But an unfortunate side effect of this development may be to discount the importance of learning about the Canadian state (in all the forms it has taken) and the Canadian nation-state.

Third, an odd assumption about Canadian Studies has always haunted the teaching and research units. Some fellow academics, usually ones little involved in the units, have assumed that Canadian Studies is about justifying and defending the current shape of the Canadian state and nation. In other words, the units are seen as hangouts for unthinking and uncritical Canadian nationalists. While such units indeed presuppose that it is a worthwhile endeavour to encourage the understanding of the geography called Canada and the people who comprise it, particularly for people who expect to engage in its political and social processes, there are, at least in my experience, few unreconstructed, flag-waving scholars involved in the endeavour. Returning to the early years of the Canadian Studies project, it is interesting how critical, even pessimistic, some of the early scholars were. In the first issue of the *Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d'études canadiennes*, which was designed as a bilingual academic outlet for Canadian Studies research, the editors were surprisingly worried about the state of the nation. This was in the so-called period of national euphoria leading up to the centennial of the Canadian nation-state (in its current form) in 1967: “Canada’s national political life has degenerated to a condition beyond patience,” wrote editor Denis Smith in the first issue from May 1966.

### **KEEPING CANADIAN TOPICS ON THE ACADEMIC AGENDA**

There were reasons then, and there are reasons today, to be wary of the type of approach represented by Canadian Studies. It is fair to point out that area studies approaches are themselves a product of Cold War thinking, when the US government poured funds into encouraging the study of the United States overseas, and dedicated resources to the multidisciplinary understanding of parts of the world where the country had keen geopolitical interests. The Canadian approach reflected that tendency in some ways, though at a much smaller scale abroad and with fewer governmental controls. Within Canada, the development of teaching and research units largely stemmed from a desire to ensure that Canadian topics remained on the academic agenda. The creation of teaching units reflected provincial circumstances and decisions; research units depended on funds.

In the case of the Robarts Centre, and a few others across the country (Trent, McGill, Mount Allison, UBC, and Carleton, among others), generous endowments have allowed the research units to maintain a profile for Canadian topics within the university and often beyond, and to create a space where Canadianists from various disciplines can meet and collaborate. Resource decisions based on

the numbers of majors that programs require to survive may lead to the further shrinking of Canadian Studies programs across the country, as has happened over the past two decades. But such decisions, one can hope, will not reduce the place of the study of the land and the people of the geopolitical entity called Canada. Indeed, the research units that foster Canadian Studies may find that they will play a key role as they face the challenges of diminishing commitment for Canadian Studies teaching at home and abroad. ■