

The Summit and beyond

BY JANE KOUSTAS

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The 2024 International Canadian Studies Summit provided a unique, timely, and extraordinary opportunity for Canadianists from an impressive range of disciplines and geopolitical and linguistic backgrounds to reflect on the past, present, and future of the study of Canada and to discuss strategies for the promotion, dissemination, and revitalization of Canadian Studies on the national and international scenes. In addition to generating both questions and ideas, the Summit created a community of engaged students, academics, and government and private sector stakeholders. For the International Council for Canadian Studies (ICCS), which experienced the 2012 cancellation of the Understanding Canada program ordered by John Baird, Stephen Harper's minister of foreign affairs, as a near-fatal blow to its programming and a direct attack on its *raison d'être*, the perspectives and input contributed by the experts and practitioners at the Summit provided valuable insight and guidance; the ICCS, its membership, and centres and programs dedicated to the study of Canada need to refocus, reach out, and become more proactive.

SHARPEN THE FOCUS

If you can't handle a heavier hammer, find a sharper nail.

Following the elimination of Understanding Canada, the ICCS, as well as national and international associations for Canadian Studies, focused initially on reinstating the program. In theory, this should have been an easy sell. Studies have demonstrated that investments in Canadian Studies yield a return of \$36 for every dollar spent—and this number does not consider less tangible gains such as academic exchange, the enhancement of the image of Canada, and valuable student engagement. However, all attempts to use these arguments to sway government officials, particularly those in the Department of Global Affairs, were met with outright dismissal. The total cancellation of Understanding Canada was an overt rejection; the budget line had disappeared, suggesting that it was not worth saving in any form. Moreover, government agencies, and Global Affairs Canada in particular, demonstrated an anti-academic bias.

As attendees at the Summit observed, arguing for the reinstatement of Understanding Canada, however heavy the hammer used, proved to be a non-starter and would continue to be so. Similarly, emphasizing the role and potential of Canadian Studies to build capacity in cultural or soft diplomacy and to contribute to the enhancement of Canada's image abroad did not gain any traction. Both somewhat outdated and possibly suspiciously elitist, these sales pitches relied too heavily on past success and, furthermore, suggested that Canada's image needed work due to possible neglect by those responsible for building it.

The Summit brought to the fore the need to develop a forward-looking strategy with a political angle in order to coax the government back to the table and to render the study of Canada, and the ICCS, more relevant and of greater interest to other parties, including philanthropic organizations and, of course, universities. One such approach could be to demonstrate the potential and capacity of Canadianists to promote and showcase Canadian excellence in research and teaching, not only in Canadian Studies but also in fields somewhat outside the traditional ken, such as economics, business,

trade, and commerce. Emphasis must be put on our ability to facilitate networking between academic, government, and private sectors. A strategic plan should highlight proven Canadian excellence in research, teaching, student engagement, and the production and dissemination of culture. It must also underline the frequency with which Canada is used as a model or means of comparison in fields ranging from environmental and health policy to language legislation. For example, the outstanding work done by Canadianists to better understand and further explore the complexities of Indigenous peoples places them at the forefront of this internationally relevant and multi-faceted area of research. And Canadian excellence should be showcased in many more fields, including the management of the environment, the importance of the Arctic, peacekeeping, presence on the international stage, human rights, health care, and education.

DEMONSTRATE THE CURRENT RELEVANCE AND VALUE OF THE STUDY OF CANADA

What have you done for me lately?

Past attempts to secure support focused on the return on investment and goodwill generated by previous funding. Strategic planning must now showcase instead how the study of Canada can advance the objectives of the Canadian government as well as those of universities, philanthropic agencies, and other potential partners. With a network of 29 associations in more than 30 countries, the ICCS boasts approximately 3,000 members; it is vital to demonstrate how they can serve the goals of these funding parties.

Nik Nanos suggested that Canadianists should demonstrate their capacity to contribute to ongoing projects and discussions. For example, a strategic plan could showcase expertise in the following areas:

- the prospects for improved relations after renegotiation of the Canada–US–Mexico Agreement (CUSMA);
- the role and impact of the Canada–European Union Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA); and
- the role and impact of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

Engagement in these areas would strengthen ties among academics and between the academy and other stakeholders, including Canadian embassies, officials directly involved with the above-mentioned programs, and private sector representatives.

Previous discussions with the government were coloured by an anti-academic bias indicating that advocacy for the study of Canada needs to demonstrate commitment to student engagement and experiential learning as well as professionalization in the field; activities cannot be confined to the purely academic sector. Proposals must highlight career opportunities and associations' engagement with stakeholders beyond the academy. Strategic planning must stress Canadian excellence across a wide range of fields, including trade and commerce, and emphasize Canadianists' capacity and commitment to deliver in these areas.

Associations, and the ICCS in particular, need to build a repository of opportunities, expert databases, potential collaborators, guest speakers, and other online resources to reach a broader audience and to demonstrate their value and relevance. Mentoring and online sessions should be a priority. Websites can then be used for publicity showcasing what we are doing *now* to promote the study of Canada.

While the term "Canadian Studies" is widely used, in some sectors it implies a particular university program, department, or centre, thus suggesting that support is aimed at an academic unit. The term "the study of Canada" circumvents this ambiguity, and it would be difficult for potential funders, especially the government, to claim disinterest in the study of Canada. For this reason as well, courses must highlight interdisciplinarity and present Canadian content in meaningful ways. Faculty mem-

bers from across and outside academia can bring Canadian excellence to the classroom from different perspectives and backgrounds and bolster the value of Canadian content on the national and international scene. Such collaboration also demonstrates faculty members' commitment to interdisciplinarity and to internationalization, as well as the wide reach of those engaged in the study of Canada at their own institution.

REACH FURTHER

It is not what you know, but who you know.

Both guest lecturers, Senator Woo in particular, emphasized that members and associations must reach beyond the traditional catchment area to secure funding and support. In addition to actively approaching embassies, consulates, and other conventional targets, associations must develop ties with the private sector, philanthropic organizations, and, on the international scene, the Canadian diaspora. Like-minded diplomats and government officials, like Senator Woo, should be approached directly, not simply with a request for funding, but with proposals that highlight how Canadianists can contribute to existing goals and projects.

Expat communities typically represent a wide range of interests, expertise, and connections—for example, to the business sector. While associations need not downplay their academic focus, it is essential to develop programming and approaches that appeal to, and reach beyond, the traditional audience. Extending invitations to talks, exhibits, guest lectures, and other events can increase awareness. Also, businesses could be incited to support bursaries, internships, scholarships, and other activities if presented with a convincing proposal based on a strategic plan.

In sum, the 2024 International Canadian Studies Summit brought to the fore the need for Canadianists on the national and international scene to improve the present and to build the future with a focus on long- and short-term goals, concrete objectives, specific funding requests, and a proactive approach aimed at a diverse audience that showcases Canadian excellence widely and broadly; we need a sharper nail, a more boastful pitch, and more Canada watchers. ■