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PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

The Scholar and the State Revisited: Further Words of Caution

JOHN KENDLE

Eleven years ago Roger Graham, in a thoughtful address to the Canadian Historical Association, reflected on the relationship between “the scholar and the state” in Canada. He viewed with alarm the threat he perceived to our tradition of disinterested scholarship. It was clear to him that as researchers became increasingly dependent on public funds the more the freedom of the scholar would be threatened by “the same demands for economy, efficiency, rationalization and relevance” that were currently causing “the more direct intervention in the affairs of the universities by the state.” The possibility existed that guidelines or directives would be formulated by government or its agencies based on “its definition of the needs of the state and society” to which scholars would be expected to adhere if they wished to be funded. He feared that in the long run “those may suffer whose scholarly interests are not in the recent past, especially the recent Canadian past, or in those aspects of the past that appear to be directly related to present issues.”

As proof of the underlying trend, he referred to the first volume of the report of the Senate Special Committee on Science Policy (otherwise known as the Lamontagne Report after its chairman, Maurice Lamontagne) which had been published the previous year. The report had been highly critical of uncoordinated independent scholarship and recommended the need for more control over research activities. In future the researcher would have “to accept the fact that most research activities had become political and would have to be guided by national goals and subjected to systematic review in light of those objectives....” The researcher and the politician would have to become partners, not only living together but working together and helping each other serve society better. “The researcher will of course have to remain a true scientist but he will also become a servant of the public with important social functions to fulfill.”¹ Though Graham admitted that lip-service was often paid in the Lamontagne Report and other contemporary publications of the Science Council of Canada to pure and independent research it was clear to him that “the emphasis was on the need for more applied, more mission-oriented research relevant to social needs and national goals.” Graham was adamant that additional and continued support for research was essential in Canada but not at the cost of researchers becoming “handmaidens of the state [he suggested “cunuchs” might be a better word] attuning our research efforts to a prescribed order of priorities, a patly defined list of goals, in

1. Canada, *A Science Policy for Canada, Report of the Senate Special Committee on Science Policy*, Vol. I: *A Critical Review Past and Present*. (Ottawa, 1970), p. 271.

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the belief that all that matters is dollars and lots of them.” He ended his remarks with an eloquent reaffirmation of the role of the independent scholar contributing to a lively and creative intellectual life in Canada.²

What has happened in the relationship between the scholar and the state since Professor Graham sounded his words of caution? More specifically, where does the social science and humanities research community now stand *vis-à-vis* government? Was Roger Graham’s alarm justified? After all he admitted at the time that his fears might be exaggerated, “possibly unsupported by much in the way of objective evidence,” and that nothing was yet government policy. We now have far more evidence at our disposal than had Professor Graham and it clearly demonstrates his prescience. Not all his fears have yet been realized but the trend is apparent. Gradually and incrementally the scholar’s independent role, particularly in the social sciences and humanities, is being circumscribed as a result of decisions made in the presumed interests of the nation.

In order to understand as fully as possible what has been happening over the past few years it is necessary to glance once more at the Lamontagne Report for it is increasingly apparent that its recommendations and guidelines and, more important, the values and assumptions that permeate it have had a major impact on federal government thinking over the last decade. The Senate Committee recommended that by 1980 up to 90 per cent of federal government funding for R & D be devoted to applied and mission oriented research. The remainder was to be divided between three new funding councils in the physical sciences, the life sciences, and the social sciences and humanities and was to be ear-marked for curiosity-oriented research in universities and similar institutions. While essentially unwilling to allow the supplier of research to determine “the level and distribution of research activities,”³ the Committee believed that without the knowledge and the theory generated by fundamental curiosity-based research the government would be incapable of reacting to rapidly evolving social, economic, and cultural problems. The Committee was prepared to tolerate such research as long as it met the overall needs of government and society. While confirming that excellence should determine successful applicants, the Committee believed “the criterion of social relevance should be used to allocate financial resources...and to select projects.”⁴

The same thinking pervaded the Committee’s approach to the pressing problem of skilled manpower. The Committee argued that science policy in Canada should “be concerned with the maintenance of a balanced supply of scientific and technological manpower, including managers and administrators competent to orient the national R & D effort and use its results for the cultural, economic, and social advantage of the nation.” It would, therefore, not be enough to rely on the inclinations of students “who if left to themselves might overcrowd some professions and neglect others.”

2. Roger Graham, ‘The Scholar and the State: A Word of Caution’, *Historical Papers*, (1971), pp. 1-12.

3. *A Science Policy for Canada*, 1, p. 268.

4. Canada, *A Science Policy for Canada, Report of the Senate Special Committee on Science Policy*, Vol. II: *Targets and Strategies for the Seventies* (Ottawa, 1975), p. 447.

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Scholarship and fellowship programs would have to be determined by R & D goals and used to correct imbalances.⁵

In 1975 added emphasis was given to the Senate Committee's conclusions by the findings of the Commission on Canadian Studies chaired by Tom Symons. Its report, entitled *To Know Ourselves*, was a damning condemnation of the state of teaching and research in all fields related to Canada at Canadian universities. It was clear that in future there would have to be a greater commitment to Canadian studies. This did not mean "impeding the range and freedom of academic inquiry or...building educational barricades against the cultural and research achievements of other lands." In fact, the Commission warned "against the danger of intellectual xenophobia," and urged "the importance of a full and rounded Canadian participation in international scholarly activity."⁶ Nevertheless, deliberate action was required if inadequacies were to be repaired. The Commissioners therefore recommended that "the support of teaching and research in Canadian studies should be clearly identified as a major part of the mandate for federal granting agencies, and that additional resources should be provided to [those] agencies by the government to enable them to give greater financial support to work in [that] field."⁷

Thus by the mid-seventies there existed strong pressure for greater rationalization of science policy, greater government supervision over what it was getting for its money, and an emphatic argument for monies in the Canadian area much of which should be used to study and, hopefully, understand contemporary problems.

The establishment of the Ministry of State for Science and Technology (MOSST) in 1971 to oversee the development of an integrated science policy had underlined the significance the government was prepared to give to the concerns and arguments of the Lamontagne Committee, but it was only in the aftermath of the Symons Report that major changes were made in the granting structure. By the spring of 1978 three revamped, or new, councils were in place: the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), the Medical Research Council (MRC), and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), the last having been hived off from the Canada Council, leaving that body responsible for the arts. The government wanted the new councils to support concerted research in areas of national interest, the training of research manpower, and fundamental or curiosity-based research. The government had clearly taken the arguments of the Lamontagne Committee and the Symons Commission to heart, but it was interesting to note that the government had not left the new councils free to concentrate on curiosity-based, or independent, research as Lamontagne had recommended. Additional priorities and goals had been established for them.

5. *Ibid.*, II, pp. 377 and 455.

6. T.H.B. Symons, *To Know Ourselves, The Report of the Commission on Canadian Studies*, 2 vols. (Ottawa, 1975), pp. 127-8.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 134B.

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That SSHRC was seen as helping to provide a base for policy-formation was made clear in two documents prepared by MOSST in 1979.⁸ MOSST argued that the “development of government policy and the improvement of social service” would be assisted by improving the links between decision-makers and university researchers in the human sciences. For that reason the devotion of “a growing proportion of the university research effort...to concerted programs in areas of national concern”⁹ was essential, especially since a reservoir of trained researchers in key areas would result. MOSST admitted the development of such programmes represented a “deliberate and orchestrated” reorientation of university research but justified the change in light of the “evolving public perception of the role of science in society and the emerging national role of R & D.” Anyway, MOSST did not think excellence would be affected nor the strength of basic research sapped by the university research community playing “a vigorous role in the establishment and realization of desirable objectives.”¹⁰

The research community had long called for a separate funding agency for the social sciences and the humanities in the belief that they would fare better if divorced from the performing arts side of the Canada Council, but when the break was finally made the new Council was totally dependent on government largesse, answerable to a minister, and thus much more amenable to government direction. Many scholars were concerned about the new council’s vulnerability to political interference. In 1978 the Healey Commission on Graduate Studies in the Social Sciences and Humanities reflected that concern and sounded a note of warning. The Commissioners, one of whom was Blair Neatby, pointed out that governments were becoming more confident about what research was relevant and what results were valid. They were, “therefore, more likely to use the power of the purse to influence a research council in the humanities and social sciences.”¹¹ Obviously, the new Council would have to be “accountable publicly for its administration of public funds” but “its judgement of how best to foster and promote the humanities and social sciences should not be too easily swayed by the attitudes or preferences of those who hold the purse strings.”¹² In the Commissioners’ opinion, the new Council should not be involved in research and development that promised to produce direct economic advantage to Canada. “Instead of relevance the [new] Council...should be concerned with scholarship.”¹³

SSHRC was born during a time of severe fiscal restraint and therefore inherited many of the funding problems of its predecessor. The federal government’s support for university research in the social sciences and humanities had been pitifully small for years compared with that in the physical and life sciences. In the early seventies during a period of runaway inflation the Canada Council’s funding, particularly that for the social sciences and humanities, declined in both relative and real terms. At the same

8. “Federal Funding of University Research: Major Issues”, MOSST Background Paper #7 (November 1979); “A Rationale for Federal Funding of University Research”, MOSST Background Paper #8 (November 1979).

9. MOSST #7, pp. 12-3.

10. MOSST #8, p. 18.

11. *Report of the Commission on Graduate Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2 vols. (Ottawa, 1978), p. 299.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 297.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 514.

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time the government continued to expand its own spending on in-house and contract research which it either controlled or directed. During its last year of operation, 1977-78, the Canada Council received only \$30.5 million of the total federal expenditure of \$441 million on human sciences. In real terms it meant a drop of 22 per cent over the decade for the support of Canada's major sponsor of independent research.¹⁴

Over the years, the status of the Council had also changed dramatically. Founded in 1957, it had drawn for eight years solely on the endowment of James Dunn and Isaac Killam and thus functioned essentially as a private foundation, untied to government policy. But since the mid-sixties it had been receiving an annual appropriation from the government and the Treasury Board had been monitoring its activities. When, in the early seventies, the government began to earmark certain funding for particular purposes it was clear the Council had irrevocably lost its full independence. The Council's reduced autonomy and the vulnerability of its successor were underlined when \$1.1 million of its final appropriation "was identified by the government as 'thrust funds', to be used in the humanities and social sciences program for new activities that would correct regional imbalances, encourage multi-disciplinary effort, or address problems of national concern." In June 1978, after SSHRCC had assumed its responsibilities, the Minister of State for Science and Technology announced an increase of \$2 million in the new Council's budget. The increase was for "research efforts in areas of national concern" and supplemented the funds provided for that purpose the previous year.¹⁵ Before the SSHRCC or its research community could fully absorb the implications of this action it was subsequently announced that its expenditures for 1979-80 were to be cut by \$2.1 million "with the clear implication that these cuts were to apply to activities outside the scope of the thrust funds."¹⁶ Nothing could have more starkly revealed the role that SSHRCC was expected to play. It appeared to at least one commentator that if the government continued to emphasize "thrust funds" and to restrain or curtail "the untied element of the appropriation, the ability of the new Council to assess the needs of its clientele and to respond according to its own assessment will be progressively diminished. What had been, under the Canada Council, a public but autonomous activity will then become, unmistakably, an arm of government."¹⁷

It is within the fiscal and political constraints outlined above that SSHRCC has functioned during the past four years. It has not been an easy task to balance the interests of the research community and the pressures of government. To its credit SSHRCC has continued to make independent research its first priority and its director André Fortier has taken every opportunity to state the case for maintaining open-ended research in the social sciences and humanities. But, in the main, his efforts and those of his colleagues have been unavailing. Only fifteen months ago the

14. See John E. Trent, "Some Facts and Figures on the Funding of the Human Sciences in Canada by the Federal Government 1968-1978", SSFC Background Paper (1979); and Frank Milligan, "The Canada Council as a public body", *Canadian Public Administration*, 22 (Summer 1979), pp. 269-89.

15. Milligan, pp. 277-8.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 278-9.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 279.

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government's priorities and the marginalization of independent research in the social sciences and the humanities were once more sharply underscored. In March 1981 SSHRCC was informed by the office of the Minister of Communications, Francis Fox, that there would be no additional funding for 1981-82 unless SSHRCC revamped its five-year plan and placed greater emphasis on Canadian studies and strategic themes "of national importance." This was political interference with a vengeance but after the protests of M. Fortier and his colleagues were turned aside there appeared to be no alternative but to comply and to construct a programme that would meet government needs and protect, as much as possible, independent research. A new five-year plan was drawn up reflecting a major orientation toward the government's priorities while all other areas of the budget were held static in constant 1981 dollars — an article, I might add, much depreciated, without the real value of a 1978, let alone a 1968, dollar and hardly something to be pleased about. After much debate and a certain degree of lobbying by the research community, the Cabinet finally agreed to allocate \$5 million in new money to SSHRCC for 1981-82 and to provide an inflationary factor of \$6 million for 1982-83. No monies beyond the base amount of \$5 million were allocated for 1983-84, so SSHRCC will have to re-enter the budget bargaining process within the Social Development Envelope during the coming year. The whole program will be renewed and reassessed by the government in 1984. That in itself seems ominous.

Many social science and humanist activities will suffer as a result of these decisions. Funding for all areas other than Canadian will fall proportionately over the next three years. Post-graduate training in non-Canadian areas will be reduced. The exchange of ideas either by publication or conference will be inexorably undermined for Canadianist and non-Canadianist alike, and an involvement with the international community of scholars will prove increasingly difficult. More fundamentally, despite the reassurances of Francis Fox and André Fortier, it appears inevitable that independent research, whether in Canadian or non-Canadian fields but particularly in the latter, will suffer as a consequence of policies so exclusively directed to matters "in the national interest."

Perhaps I might elaborate on this point because it is a contentious one. Both the government and SSHRCC have maintained that the strategic grants program "in areas of national importance" in no way affects the curiosity-based nature of the research nor the independence of the researcher. It is emphatically claimed that such research is not directed. Surely, this is but a play on words. If by "directed" one means that the researcher is given a specific question to answer or a specific objective to reach then, as yet, it is not directed, but if by "directed" one means that researchers are steered toward particular themes or induced to switch fields by the lure of ready funding then research is being directed. As it happens, SSHRCC has openly admitted its desire to provide a knowledge-base for decision-makers and to help formulate policy for society.¹⁸ We have been told that in the selection of projects under the strategic themes rubric SSHRCC's officers would "take into account not only the quality of the project

18. Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, *Annual Report 1978-1979*, p. 6.

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but also its potential contribution to a general understanding of certain important questions of immediate concern to society.”¹⁹ Since its inception, SSHRCC has been interested in “action oriented research, research to have some impact.”²⁰ On the face of it, it would seem to be difficult to retain one’s independence as a researcher in such an atmosphere.

It is also claimed that the retention of the peer evaluation process within the strategic grants program ensures the independence of the researcher. Again, such an assertion begs the question. It has been acknowledged that such researchers are engaged in fulfilling short-term political priorities, and the maintenance of peer-evaluation in no way removes that factor. The evaluation takes place within a given set of established parametres which are usually highly structuralist-functionalist in nature. Neither the prospective researcher nor the evaluator is given the opportunity to assess or criticize the parametres themselves. We are all aware that “there is a relationship between the way a problem is defined and the nature of the subsequent research. They are not two independent halves that arise in different spaces and can be fitted together to form a unified whole. The discourse within which a problem arises allows only some responses to be solutions.”²¹ As we know, it is often necessary in order to get a grant for a researcher to conform to expectations about what kind of research *ought* to be done. There are therefore inherent difficulties about “the relationship between social science research and political means and ends. The ubiquitous appeal to ‘peer group review’ is not obviously an adequate response to all these issues.”²² Strategic grants research is not independent in the sense in which that term is generally understood within the research community. That being so we have witnessed a considerable government encroachment upon independent research in the social sciences and humanities since 1978.

Again, I wish to make my point as clearly as possible. I am not suggesting that one can arbitrarily separate independent and applied research as if the former is the only kind that can be considered fundamental. Much applied research is fundamental and much independent research can be applied. To argue that the twain can never meet would be absurd. What is of concern is that the government is encroaching on the one area in which independent research, unassociated with contemporary short-term problems, should be permitted to flourish.

Much of the concern expressed about the recent five, now three, year plan has been over the added emphasis on Canadian studies. It must be recognised immediately that Canadian studies has long needed greater support, but there is a danger, given the funding priorities of the government, that research and graduate training will become over-balanced toward matters Canadian. Even in the Canadian area there will be an imbalance created by an orientation toward selected themes. That a public agency should devote a large proportion of its monies to Canadian research and teaching is

19. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

20. Deo Poonwassie and D.N. Sprague, *Funding Research on Native Affairs. A Workshop Report* (Winnipeg, 1981), p. 37.

21. Andrew Belsey, “Social science and politics at the time of our present discontents”, *New Universities Quarterly*, 36 (Winter 1981/82), p. 60.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

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understandable but the implications of doing so must also be understood. It tends to lower the amount of money available for non-Canadian research and for the training of Canadian graduate students in non-Canadian areas. The latter is vital if we are to be in a position in the early to mid-1990s to replace retiring staff in those areas or to expand departments to accommodate the influx from the predicted upsurge in student enrolment. It would be invidious to find ourselves having once again to depend heavily on teachers and scholars from outside Canada to fill the vacancies in our ranks created by the short-sighted policies of today. Ironically, a programme designed to heighten our level of awareness and deepen our knowledge of things Canadian has the potential to contribute to our dependence on external research, scholarship, and teaching. In allocating much needed resources to Canadian studies the government must not neglect or undermine the pluralist vitality of the country's scholarly and teaching communities.

Some of our colleagues believe that SSHRCC's added emphasis on Canadian studies and strategic research will eventually attract attention to our capacities which in turn will lead to more money and more flexibility. It has been suggested that there "is a positive benefit to having [strategic research] located in the Council. It will add to the visibility and political kudos of SSHRCC, thus lessening resistance to the Council's independent research programmes."²³ Given the experiences of the past ten years, particularly of the last four, this appears to me to be shaky reasoning and a rather hopeful appraisal of future government intent. SSHRCC must be maintained as free of government interference as possible and it must be assured of sustained funding in order that it can promote the health of social sciences and humanities research, but it is doubtful that either will be easily won, and perhaps not won at all, if the research community readily accepts SSHRCC's enforced and gathering role in policy-oriented research.

In defending the social sciences and humanities and in making a case for independent research it will not suffice to adopt the government's framework and demonstrate how we can contribute to the national economy or to the resolution of contemporary problems. Such a tactic may be helpful to the government in the short-term but in the long-term it will prove harmful to all concerned: to the research community, to the government, and to the nation. The human sciences should not rush toward "relevance" or to "social responsibility" in order to get, as Roger Graham put it, a larger slice of the pie. It is not only a dangerous game which could result very quickly in the loss of virtually all untied funding but it fails to assert the value of independent research and scholarship. Governments must be reminded that "the research effort of higher education should not be directed [or steered] to purposes better served by other research institutions; and that university research [and] scholarship was sometimes intended to contest lay values as well as to serve lay needs."²⁴

23. John E. Trent, "The New SSHRC Programme: Helpful or Harmful? The New Great Debate", *Social Sciences in Canada*, 9 (February 1982), p. 7.

24. Peter Scott, "More Questions Posed than Answers Found", *The Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 19 March 1982, p. 10.

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Nevertheless, it is clear that a dialogue must ensue. All too often the social sciences and humanities have neglected to explain their *raison d'être* to both the government and the public. Since, as André Fortier has pointed out, human values cannot be taken for granted²⁵ a major effort must be made to create a deeper understanding. Similarly, the human sciences must become far more active lobbyists than in the past. Bureaucrats and politicians must be persuaded of the long-term benefits to society of maintaining an active research and graduate community. They must be made to realize that by pushing social science research to respond to identifiable current interests they are not only undermining but undervaluing long-term reflective research. The social sciences make their greatest impact at the theoretical level. Such breakthroughs come primarily as a result of independent research and can never be imposed from above by "leaders", whether government bureaucrats or politicians. The long-term health of Canada's research and teaching communities rests on stable and steady funding for unfettered research and graduate training. The government has to be persuaded of that and only the research community can do it. We will have to assert ourselves and I do not think we should apologise for doing so. After all, our needs are relatively modest and our aims seem unexceptionable.

It is, therefore, all the more disquieting to read that one should not be critical of government policy because such criticism might endanger future funding, particularly of Canadian studies, and perhaps even SSHRCC itself. If such possibilities truly exist then it would seem there is every reason for making our views public. The research community must not be so readily persuaded to abandon its critical role and allow major decisions with far reaching implications to pass without comment. It is essential for us to maintain a wider perspective, to realize that "the national interest" is best served by ensuring independent and diversified research and teaching opportunities in all fields, Canadian and non-Canadian alike, and not in too readily accepting the *status quo* as a base for future discussion about policy and funding. We should not underestimate the influence that we can have. The rallying of the social science community in Great Britain in recent months in response to the threats of the Thatcher government and the degree to which they appear to have influenced Lord Rothschild's report on the British SSRC is encouraging. There is a case to be made and it can obviously be made effectively if the necessary commitment is there.

Similarly, we should not allow ourselves to be comforted by the thought that we have fared relatively better in recent years than our colleagues in the United States, Great Britain, West Germany, South Africa and Australia. Certainly, the degree to which governments have slashed budgets and directly intervened in the research process in those countries is numbing. As yet we have not had to face such huge losses, but it must be remembered that our situation is not particularly rosy. Our funding has never been generous and over the past fifteen years we have been increasingly marginalized as a research community. Roger Graham's alarm was not unjustified in 1971 and, if anything, his "words of caution" are even more pertinent today. We will not ensure our viability by passively shrugging our shoulders and quiescently accepting our lot. We must become engaged far earlier in the analysis and discussion of policy.

25. "Humanities and Social Sciences Research in Jeopardy?", *Council Update*, 1 (February 1981), p. 1.

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The implications for the CHA, as one of the largest and, I would suggest, one of the most respected of the learned societies, are many. The costs in terms of time, emotional and physical energy, to say nothing of money, will be considerable. We are a volunteer association and our efforts depend on the willingness of our members to engage fully in the debate. Nevertheless, it is important that the CHA continue to play an active part. The recommendations of the Park Report on Aid to Scholarly Publications and of the Dodge Report on Skilled Manpower plus the currently circulating rumour that the Canadian government may, in fact, be preparing to intervene more directly in cultural and research activities suggest we should be constantly on the alert both as individuals and as an Association to the intent of government priorities and programmes.

When Vincent Massey and his colleagues recommended the creation of a Canada Council they wanted to correct the paucity of work and opportunity in the social sciences and humanities in Canada and to add to the vibrancy of Canadian cultural and intellectual life. They did not, however, want the new Council to become an arm of the government. By "national interest" they did not mean government-defined goals. They clearly favoured state support for the arts and letters but without state control. They adopted Keynes' argument that the role of the state should be "to give courage, confidence and opportunity" but not to interfere.²⁶ Despite the apparent difficulties facing its full realization, it is, at the very least, worth reminding ourselves of that ideal in this the 25th anniversary year of a Canadian council for the arts and letters and on the 60th anniversary of the Canadian Historical Association.

26. Quoted in *Report of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences* (Ottawa, 1951), p. 375.