

Time to restore funding to Canadian studies abroad

The world needs more Canada, but a program that promotes it in the halls of global academia was slashed in 2012. Without it, Canada's voice abroad is diminished.



Susan Hodgett

Foreign Affairs

Canada has for many years been at, or near the top, of the United Nations' Human Development Index. In 2015 it scored ninth out of 188 countries reviewed. Every year the publicity about Canada's quality-of-life achievements comes and goes without much remark in the press inside Canada or abroad. Meanwhile, Canada, as a medium-range power, gets little coverage internationally, especially outside of North America.

But we are in a new epoch: a world transformed by the 2008 economic crash, political shocks provided by Brexit, the election of United States President Donald Trump, and the rise of what academics have dubbed anti-politics.

Politicians, parties, and political institutions around the world are being castigated for their inattention to rising inequality and how people live now. At the same time, Canada has a new prime minister, a new government, and a new minister of foreign affairs.

So what, some might say? As an observer of Canada for over 20 years, I say "so far so good." The messages emanating from the new Trudeau government have brought positivity and hope, and not just to Canada.

Sitting in Belfast while reading Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's mandate letter to Chrystia Freeland, I was transfixed. Promising real change to Canadians, Trudeau seeks to grow the middle classes, make government effective, and have a positive impact on the lives of Canadians—all laudable. He seeks to "restore constructive Canadian leadership...and promote Canada's interests and values."

Here in Northern Ireland, in the run-up to yet another assembly election, and following the collapse of our local devolved administration because of a paucity of transparency, openness, and most of the above, it struck me that we need more Canada.

In his public message to the new foreign minister, Trudeau asked Minister Freeland to facilitate the movement of people and goods, expand Canadian diplomacy, and seek leadership opportunities for Canada on global issues and international institutions. Furthermore, he wants her to revitalize Canada's public diplomacy, engage with partners in Canada and abroad, as well as to increase Canada's educational and cultural interaction with the world.

You might ask why a professor based in Northern Ireland would know, or indeed care, about Canadian values and government policy platforms.

Straight answer: because nearly 20 years ago I discovered a tiny program that the then Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade ran for promoting study and research of Canada. Since then, I have discussed Canada, its quality of life, and policies in China, the United States, Russia, and many other parts of the world. I have taught thousands of students at U.K. and Irish universities about Canada and its policies; I have written many papers and published internationally, on Canada, its diversity, and its tolerance. And, I have helped policy-makers beyond Canada benefit from knowledge of its laws, values, and norms, as well as run seminars and conferences to discuss Canadian issues of the day.

I am just one of many professors worldwide who have done the same. We are Canada's international Canadianists, interested in learning and talking about the country to our publics. We are influential informants abroad connected to our presses, parliaments, policy-makers, and peoples.

As the federal government sets its next budget, lays out its priorities, and deals with the challenges forthcoming in an uncertain world, Canada needs as many partners as it can find. But, more importantly, the world needs to hear once again, and louder, Canada's reason, diversity, and tolerance. Mr. Trudeau's liberal values should be required listening by the world at this point in history.

But Canada is missing a vital trick. Around the world, thousands of professors (working with even more university students) learn about Canada and its cultures. It is what we do in our everyday jobs. But our numbers are shrinking fast, as since 2012, Canada's government has chosen not to support a low-cost program pump-priming our work with small research or teaching funds. And with the shrinking of Canada's investment in Canadianist professors and students abroad, so shrinks Canada's exposure to those outside its embassies.

Canada is losing, month by month, its academic allies beyond its borders.

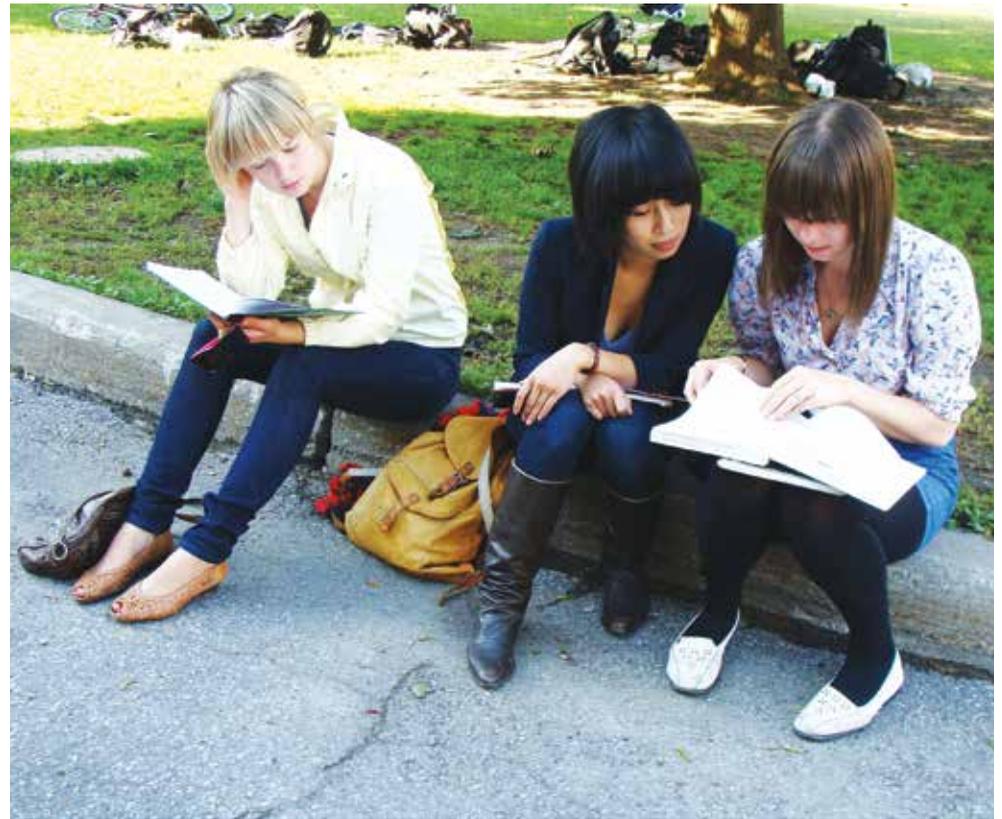
Canada is struggling to market its education abroad. Canadian universities are frustrated by their poor performance in attracting students from the U.S. and beyond. Canada is losing, month by month, its academic allies beyond its borders, both professors and students. And, sadly, this is at a time when other countries are investing serious money in their academic exchanges with others.

So, while people overseas might admire Canada's good life and its government, they know next to nothing about the country.

Recently, a British colleague was discussing with me the forthcoming challenges of Brexit. We agonized about the problems to be addressed when the United Kingdom leaves the European Union, and Ireland stays. We speculated about the serious economic implications for Northern Ireland.

In closing our conversation concerning the perilous state of higher education here he asked quizzically, "Why don't you move to Canada for the good life?"

I hesitated, and then replied, "because we need more Canada—here."



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The Hill Times file photograph

Right now, we need more Canada in Northern Ireland and the world: more diversity, pluralism, tolerance, and good government. When Canada's new government was elected, I heard it said with some relief that the country was back. The question is, does anyone outside of Canada know or understand?

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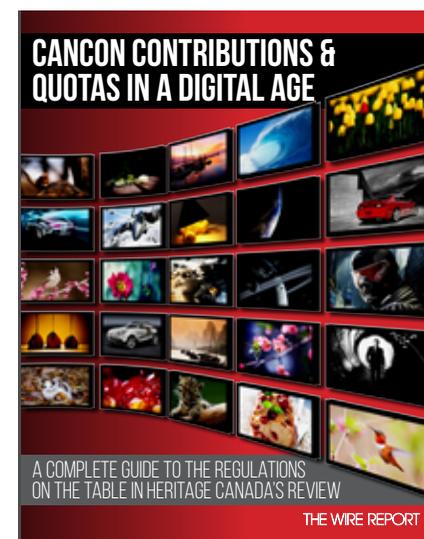
national Council for Canadian Studies, a not-for-profit group with members and associate members in 39 countries, dedicated to the promotion and support of research, education, and publication in all fields of Canadian Studies around the world. She is based in Northern Ireland at Ulster University.

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