

An interview with Jean Labrie on the Understanding Canada Program

The announcement of the creation and the implementation of the new programme *Understanding Canada*, which replaced the Canadian Studies Program of the International Education and Youth Division at the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT), elicited interest and questioning in the international community of Canadianists. *The International Canadianist* thought it might be a good idea to go to the source to ask a few questions regarding the impact of this change to Mr. Jean Labrie, Deputy Director, International Academic programs, in charge of the Canadian Studies Program at DFAIT.

Mr. Labrie, what are the main elements of the new Understanding Canada Program?

After consulting with various partners, including the international community of Canadianists and our colleagues abroad, we wanted to offer a program whose objectives would be better defined and more relevant to the needs of the numerous stakeholders, both at the academic and the administrative levels. Our first concern was to maintain the principle of academic freedom. The success and more importantly the long-standing credibility of the program rest on this principle. Of course, changes often bring uncertainty, and thus we wanted to ensure that these changes would not discourage researchers in the community. The most important changes are that some priorities have been clearly identified and that most of the components of the program are now competitive and open to organisations outside of the established Canadian Studies network. The most popular components of the program have been maintained. New ones have been implemented to reach as quickly as possible our stated objectives, and those of our stakeholders.

What are the key elements to the Understanding Canada Program?

As mentioned, academic freedom, the consolidation of the achievements of the past 30 years, and, we hope, a greater impact and better understanding of the usefulness of the program for Canada.

Can you explain what motivated these changes to DFAIT's Canadian Studies Program?

Albeit the program's success over the past 30 years, its redesign has been the result of changes in the environments we are evolving. First and foremost are the changes in the academic environment: the declining popularity of area studies, new administrative constraints within academic institutions, the Bologna process, etc. are but a few of these catalysts. Of note is that these changes had been foreseen by Canadianists themselves who had initiated their own reflection on the future of the program. There is also the governmental environment. Even if the Program generates three times the revenues that the Canadian government invests, this investment is taxpayer's money nonetheless. This money must be spent wisely and the investment must achieve clear and tangible returns. The new Program, while respecting academic freedom, will, therefore, be more relevant with regard to Canadian foreign policy and its priorities.

What are some of the most obvious benefits from changes to the program?

Not only will it better respond to the concerns of Canada, but it will facilitate the identification and recruitment of new experts on various issues of interest to Canada. It will also improve cooperation between Canadian and international academic institutions. Finally, it will create a greater synergy between the programs of the various divisions of DFAIT, other departments and other non governmental organisations.

What will be the impact of these changes to Canadianists in all parts of the world?

It is normal for Canadianists to feel some apprehensions given the importance of the changes, even if many of them foresaw the need to review the program. It is why we undertook a consultation process before finalising the program and proceeded to inform them fully before the implementation of the program on April 1, 2008. The great majority of Canadianists we have spoken to are ready to accept this new approach, and that is all we ask. Of course, we expect to and will fine tune components as we begin to implement the program. There will be an adjustment period, which may create uncertainty. But I think that most Canadianists will be satisfied and happy that

their work will be better known outside the regular Canadian Studies network, that they will be joined by new experts, and that they will benefit from added partnerships with Canadian counterparts.

With the new priorities put in place by DFAIT, that is Peace and Security; North American Partnership (including key Canada-US-Mexico issues); Economic Development and Competitiveness; Democracy, Rule of Law, Human Rights; Managing Diversity; and the Environment / Energy, how will the international community of researchers dedicated to the study of Canada be guaranteed that there will be an fair representation of all the disciplines in the field of Canadian Studies?

I do not think it is relevant to talk about fair representation. As we have stated all through the consultation and implementation stages, we do not intend to overlook or forget any discipline. We will not either count the number of Canadianists in a discipline before making a decision. Priority does not mean exclusion. If a project is not related to priority issues, it does not mean that it will not be retained. The primary criteria are academic excellence of the proposals, Canadian content and the stated results. In my opinion, it would both ill-conceived and detrimental to the program to select a low-quality project, simply because it is relevant to a priority issue.

Will the roles of the mission abroad change with the implementation of the new program?

Their role will remain essentially the same, that is, to continue to promote the program, to receive the candidate files, etc. As they have always, missions must make scholars aware of Canadian policies and their objectives with respect to each country. It is however at the organisational level where the most changes will occur. For example, a number of competitions will be national, others will be regional. Furthermore, in order to meet the requirements with regard to reporting, missions will be asked to play a greater role in monitoring progress. Unfortunately, this requirement comes at a time when resources, financial and human, are becoming more and more scarce. But, happily, on the other hand we have always been able to count on the professionalism and the extraordinary dedication of our colleagues at home and abroad. For many, Canadian Studies are much more than an extremely useful tool in Canadian foreign policy, it is a passion.

For full details, please see :

DFAIT's Understanding Canada Website at <http://www.international.gc.ca/studies-etudes/index.aspx>; and ICCS' site at http://www.iccs-ciec.ca/pages/newweb/sample2/DFAITOverview_en.asp?shownav=4.