



News Article

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Building Innovation Capacity

The Need for a National Strategy on Science and Technology

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You don't have to look very far to see or experience the impact of innovation in our lives these days. The economy of the 21st century has been focused on how we can do things better, go farther, understand more, and live better.

Regrettably, you don't have to look far to see a government that doesn't understand this. For the first time in a decade, the federal Budget, tabled earlier this year, offered nothing for this nation's innovation agenda - the sad result of Conservative tunnel vision and small thinking.

From 1997 - 2005, the Liberal government invested heavily in our future by advancing Canada's innovation agenda. Our commitment of over \$14 billion in support of basic research put Canada's R&D sector at the leading edge, breathing new life into Canada's innovation performance.

In the process, the foundation has been laid for a renaissance in research and innovation. The Canadian Foundation for Innovation has the mandate to strengthen the capacity of our universities, research hospitals and non-profit research institutes. The Canadian Institute for Health Research provides financial support to 10,000 researchers and trainees annually. Sustainable Development Technology Canada helps Canadian innovators bridge the gap between the lab and real-world marketable applications of their breakthroughs. Funding of academic positions through the Canada Research Chairs allow Canadian universities to attract and retain some of the world's most promising minds.

Another product of this rebirth is the Network of Centres of Excellence which forms partnerships between the public, non-profit and private sectors, converting Canadian research and entrepreneurial talent into economic and social benefits for all Canadians. This is especially critical since both research and the development process are essential ingredients in gaining the full benefits of the innovation economy.

In short, no government in Canadian history has invested more in Canada's research system than our previous Liberal Government.

The federal government's Innovation Strategy, officially unveiled in 2002, laid an important part of the foundation for Canada's economic future by providing the structure, focus and funding for innovation and commercialization to take hold on a national scale.

The results are already apparent. Health and life sciences researchers have already found better and more effective medications and treatments. New sources of clean energy have been developed. Leading edge information and communication technology and transformative technologies like biotechnology and nanotechnology, which have an ever expanding and wide range of applications, have also been supported by federal funds.

Having laid the foundation, there is now an urgent need to examine whether Canada should target scientific research and technology development in specific sectors. But such an examination should not be driven exclusively by commercial considerations, nor should it be at the expense of pure research. A focused approach to certain technologies makes sense if it shows promise of strong economic returns or if the technology is considered of strategic importance. The arguments are even more compelling if the technologies will help Canada achieve other objectives of non-economic nature, like reducing greenhouse gases or cure important diseases.

Recently, the Council of Canadian Academies (CCA) released its first report entitled "The State of Science and Technology in Canada." The report provides an assessment on the scientific disciplines and the technological applications in which Canada excels in a global context and have the potential to generate significant economic or social benefit. This stock taking provides important insight into the options for future action and is an excellent first step, I believe, in re-focusing a National Strategy for Science and Technology in Canada.

In moving towards this ultimate goal, there are other critical issues that have to be factored in. There is a need for a process that will allow government programmes and funding decisions to be addressed at the national rather than departmental level. Next, the time has come for an assessment of the value and potential of the government's own considerable applied research capability in contributing to the nation's wealth. In addition, comprehensive partnerships, such as the Research and Technology Park approach adopted by Waterloo and successful knowledge-based clusters like the MaRS project in Toronto, should be encouraged. These models offer the promise of bringing all the necessary ingredients together to harness the intellectual power to turn research and knowledge into commercial products and services.

Finally, risk sharing programs with industry serve a valuable purpose in stimulating technology development which would not otherwise occur. We must ensure that such programs continue.

The actions taken and commitments made by our previous Liberal government have positioned Canada well but we need to move quickly to establish the policies and processes to complete the innovation cycle. We cannot afford to squander the opportunities that are available right now to propel our economy to the next level of success.

The continuing failure of the current government to take action risks all that we have gained. Canada needs visionary leadership and a commitment to innovation. By moving quickly to develop a National Strategy for Science and Technology we can help ensure that Canada's prosperity, both economically and socially, will continue to grow and flourish well into this century and beyond.