

The aggrieved and the beguiled: experts and evidence in troubled times

Deploying our knowledge assets for enhanced international partnerships in scholarship and research is our strong card to play in this troubling world.



Paul Dufour

Researchers

Is it not a curious fact that in a world steeped in irrational hatreds which threaten civilization

itself, men and women—old and young—detach themselves wholly or partly from the angry current of daily life to devote themselves to the cultivation of beauty, to the extension of knowledge, to the cure of disease, to the amelioration of suffering, just as though fanatics were not simultaneously engaged in spreading pain, ugliness and suffering? The world has always been a sorry and confused sort of place—yet poets and artists and scientists have ignored the factors that would, if attended to, paralyse them. (Abraham Flexner, The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge, 1939)

Looking around the world these days, you would be forgiven if you felt that reason and evidence was collapsing as a sound tool of decision-making, let alone a hopeful light to shine through the darkening horizons around our planet. Brexit has stirred the populist emotions of citizens across the pond; south of the border, chaos reigns as Twitter trumps the traditional tools of public policy.

Fortunately, the knowledge and research communities have started to wake up to their civic

responsibilities. The Marches for Science that took place in April in Canada, the U.S. and around the globe were designed to address this disturbing trend that experts and expertise are under attack. Many are hitting back by creating new vehicles for improving sound integrated science and social sciences literacy in our cultures.

In Canada, rhetoric about valuing the sciences and respect for scientists is a helpful sign that things can get better. As the science minister said in a recent speech: “it is our shared responsibility to explain how investments in research and scholarship through the granting councils and CFI (Canada Foundation for Innovation) serve science and the public good.” The expert review panel she commissioned on Canada’s Fundamental Science was a good first step and we now await action on its key recommendations alongside the appointment of a new chief science advisor.

We are fortunate that we can indeed recognize our scholars and their contributions to improving the human condition. A case in point is the annual event to award Killam Prizes offered by



We are fortunate that we can indeed recognize our scholars and their contributions to improving the human condition. A case in point is the annual event to award Killam Prizes offered by the Canada Council and presented by Canada’s indefatigable Governor General David Johnston, writes Paul Dufour. *The Hill Times* photograph by Jake Wright

the Canada Council and presented by Canada’s indefatigable Governor General David Johnston. Last week at Rideau Hall, he reminded the audience that the variety and depth of work indicates the quality of research taking place in Canada, and most importantly, it is helping Canada build a smarter and more caring society. The GG Innovation Awards are another testament to his leadership in showing that expertise, creativity and knowledge matter. The CIHR Gold Leaf prizes and the NSERC Gerhard Herzberg Gold Medal Awards are yet other examples of why we need to salute our visionaries who have made a difference.

And it is intergenerational as well. The PM’s Awards for Teaching Excellence that will focus on STEM next year will no doubt help launch a new generation of inquisitive and ingenious talent. The youth ambassadors and other Canadians joining the remarkable Canada C3 (Coast to Coast to Coast) expedition that left on June 1 for its 150-day journey across the country will celebrate our diversity and will play a key

role in shaping our knowledge heritage alongside the digital learning experiences made available for teachers, students, heritage sites and museums. Visiting the magnificent, newly operational Canadian High Arctic Research Station at Cambridge Bay will be a highlight to be sure.

In fact, that research station along with other ventures offer a beacon for a stronger Canadian presence around the globe in lifting the veil of ignorance for better public policy. Deploying our knowledge assets for enhanced international partnerships in scholarship and research is our strong card to play in this troubling world. Thomas Huxley, the British biologist, said it well in 1887 when he reminded us that: “The known is finite; the unknown is infinite; we stand on an islet in the midst of an illimitable ocean of inexplicability. Our business in every generation is to reclaim a little more land.”

Paul Dufour is a fellow and adjunct professor in the Institute for Science, Society and Policy at the University of Ottawa.

The Hill Times