

‘Reimagining’ National Academies: A Northern Minerva Reboots

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By Paul Dufour

Paul Dufour is senior fellow and adjunct professor, Institute for Science, Society and Policy, Univ of Ottawa.

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‘Reimagination’ is very much in the news today (not to be confused with the imagineers at Walt Disney Imagineering). We saw the word trotted out in the 2018 federal Budget on how the 101-year-old National Research Council (NRC) was going to form a new conception of itself — not that it hasn’t been reimagined several times before.

We are also seeing it elsewhere. In the UK, preoccupied with an inward looking Brexit mindset, the seven existing research councils along with Innovate UK have been integrated into a new structure called UKRI or UK Research and Innovation. In China, where dictated governance is an oxymoron, new ways of shaping research are being put forward within the administrative apparatus of science. This occurs as that country moves rapidly to become a global science leader. And in the US, well, let’s just say that their own historic increases in science spending caught some observers by surprise.

Back here in Canada, something unusual (some would even say unprecedented) has been taking place within the knowledge community. For starters, the wizened ‘whine and wimp’ lobby is gradually being replaced by a more politically astute assemblage of organizations that represent various dimensions of a newly attuned ecosystem for ingenuity and creativity. They have learned to make a stronger public policy case for why investing in the long-term can reap benefits to society and future generations. And elected representatives serving Canadians seem to be listening. Witness the impact of student groups, researchers, NGOs and others in the latest federal budget.

One of these revitalized players is the 135-year-old Royal Society of Canada (RSC). Of course, when you are that well-anchored, it can be difficult to change attitudes and perceptions about you. But sound leadership makes a difference. An honorific society designed in part to mobilize Canadian intellectuals in all fields to work with Canadians and address pressing issues of our times has made strides in trying to rejuvenate itself. As one of its earliest members envisioned the unique multidisciplinary blending of the RSC in 1883:

“Let us not forget that science alone can enable us to discover, to explore all of the vast treasures which are concealed in the lands of our vast country. Let us not forget that science and literature united can do much to attract to our shores the vast flood of European immigration in search of homes, of bread and liberty.”

So when the RSC recently launched its strategic plan for 2018-2022, abetted by a broad consultation, optimism has emerged that a ‘re-imagined’ academy can play a pivotal role in reshaping a future Canada — along with other key partners. Indeed, one of the pillars of the three-pronged plan is centred on greater engagement respecting evidence-informed decision-making.

To punctuate this approach and to take advantage of Canada’s hosting of the 2018 G7 Summit in June, RSC has launched a series of G7 Research Summits to provide input to the government’s agenda and its global statecraft.

Advancing gender equity in research – a priority of the Trudeau administration – was on the map two weeks ago at the Museum of Nature. This was during a meeting of the G7 science academies in Ottawa when the RSC worked with its partners to develop two statements about the global Arctic and our digital future. As has been done in past summits by other G7 academies, these succinct, readable reviews with science-informed recommendations will serve to give summit leaders reliable background knowledge when they come together in Charlevoix, Québec.

But before that, with a timely event given the Facebook firestorm, the RSC will explore ‘our digital future’ in more detail, partnering with the NRC in examining transparency and openness along with inclusion and accessibility. Unlike the technology, ethics does not scale. Hence, regulatory, privacy and policy issues will undoubtedly dominate.

Later in May, the theme of Arctic sustainability takes centre stage with discussions of climate change impacts on northern communities and the critical role of traditional knowledge within Inuit populations. This is a result of building upon a Montreal event on a related student-led Arctic science diplomacy, which is organized by the Science & Policy Exchange.

Hopefully, this will bring on board some of the key recommendations raised in the [National Inuit Strategy on Research](#) released on March 22. And in the fall, a conference on Data to Insights, with Statistics Canada – another 100- year- old organization – will underscore data literacy and the use of reliable information. Finally, to round off the research series, sustainable oceans will be on the agenda of the RSC with key experts from Canada and abroad.

The reimagination of the RSC is a healthy one because it responds to an underlying current that excellence, facts and evidence must come to the fore in a confusing, post-truth world. But for it to succeed, a joined-up approach will be needed. There must also be serious commitments from the various governments to implement and disseminate the input in a meaningful way for and with their citizens.