

The Harper Government, The End of Cultural Diplomacy And Canadian Studies Around the World

Delia Montero C.*

In the past, the Canadian government exercised very dynamic, open cultural diplomacy based on funding cultural, educational, and exchange programs to promote a good image and familiarize people around the world with its country. However, that policy ended when Stephen Harper's Conservative government took office.

*Professor and researcher at the Autonomous Metropolitan University (UAM), Iztapalapa campus, and coordinator of the Inter-university Seminar on Canadian Studies in Latin America (Seminecal), del@xanum.uam.mx

Open or cultural diplomacy made it possible for Canadian embassies to grow closer to universities and institutions of higher education in many different countries. It was an opportunity for people throughout the world to know more about Canada and to create networks of academic exchange. It also made the difference in managing its image *vis-à-vis* that of other countries, particularly the United States.

Along these lines, in 1981, the International Council for Canadian Studies (ICCS) was created, a decentralized, not-for-profit body made up of 22 international associations and

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6 associate members in countries of Latin America, Europe, and Asia, and in the United States. ICCS representatives exist in 28 countries, among them Mexico.¹ Each association and associate member has as its mission the development and strengthening of Canadian studies, plus reporting annually about all the activities related to Canadian studies in its country.

The ICCS was born at a time when some called Canada the society of abundance. Prosperity spurred unprecedented cultural growth, both for popular culture, which became something consumed massively, and for “high culture.” Artists had broader, more numerous audiences, while Canadian literature, particularly Francophone literature, experienced a veritable boom.²

In this scenario, the ICCS’s aim was to support research, teaching, and publications related to Canada on several continents. From the beginning, its activities were funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade, and Development Canada (DFATD), whose policy was part of a research development plan.³

The ICCS seemed then to be an exceptional place for encounters, offering multiple perspectives for international

collaboration for anyone who wanted to learn about Canada. So, it was consolidated as a powerful instrument in the exchange of communications among researchers from different parts of the world, facilitating the multiplication of contacts with other colleagues and the creation of networks for research and the exchange of information about work related to Canada worldwide in all fields.

Little by little, then, an international community of researchers interested in Canadian studies was created and consolidated. In a short time, the ICCS became a strong institution recognized in Canada and the rest of the world: this cultural diplomacy seemed to be creating the hoped-for results.

By the end of the 1980s, important debates began to be waged about its future, its functions, the role of the international community of Canadianists, and how to best continue its development. This put on the table its relationship with the DFATD, which at that time considered its relationship with the ICCS very close and, therefore, favorable for managing a series of academic programs abroad. By that time, the ICCS was already a solid, stable, durable institution that Canadian scholars could count on; this is why the management of the ministry’s programs made it possible for the council to become a major stakeholder.

The ICCS’s highest body is its Board of Directors, made up of an Executive Committee and one representative of each association and associate member. One of the board’s tasks is to plan annual activities, as well as to guide and determine general policies. This body has a series of written and unwritten rules aimed at maintaining good governance. One of the



Andy Clark/Reuters

Prime Minister Harper on an official visit to Peru.

written rules is that all documents and meetings must be written or held in Canada's two official languages, and that all representatives and members must speak and read them. However, the unwritten rule was that the dominant language in the meetings was that of whoever was president at the time; this meant that the unwritten rules prevailed for a long time in the board's operations, since not all the members spoke both languages.

Two groups could be distinguished inside the ICCS: the Anglophones, represented mainly by the United States, the Nordic countries, Great Britain, Ireland, Israel, India, and Australia, among others; and the Francophones, made up mainly of the Latin American countries, France, Belgium, and Poland. These linguistic differences presented tensions between Anglophone and Francophone unity and diversity, tensions that in turn characterize the existence of Canadian society itself.

The ICCS administered funds received by the MAECI; it designed a budget that gave each association and associate member monies for activities aimed at developing the study of Canada. In the 1990s, Canada's parliamentary committee in charge of reviewing foreign policy decided that it was the right moment to continue with international cooperation; therefore, the projection of Canadian culture continued to be a top priority. In this order of things, it was recommended that international cultural, scientific, and educational issues be dealt with as a fundamental dimension of Canadian foreign policy.⁴ This allowed the ICCS to manage some additional MAECI programs and establish itself as a stakeholder of major importance in the field of Canadian studies internationally.

Since then, the ICCS coordinated the promotion of research and specialization scholarships for Canada, as well as the aid program for international research networks, whose aim is to collaborate among working groups from Canada and the rest of the world. These MAECI financed initiatives fostered the development of comparative studies and a higher profile of ICCS internationally.

The ICCS operated through contracts with MAECI, renewed annually, which were its main source of income. On occasion, it sought out other financing to implement its own programs, but without very favorable results.

By the end of the 1990s, the ICCS began to run into difficulties: it lost some of its contracts and little by little, the members of its Board of Directors began to age. In addition to the oft-mentioned loss of programs awarded by the ministry and the resulting drop in budget, another difficulty the board

faced was the need to modernize itself by adjusting its structure. However, the ICCS was not able to overcome the strong inertia created over 30 years of functioning.

The lack of structural modernization and the aging of board members—the average age was 60—as well as the lack of vision and foresight about the changes that were approaching, made it impossible for this organization to find new sources of income in the face of a Conservative government uninterested in promoting culture. In addition to this, it had to deal with the rules of the game imposed by Stephen Harper's administration.

In 2006, the Conservative Party leader took office with a minority government. One of his objectives was to reduce government participation in order to put an end to the fiscal mismatches between the federal and provincial governments. With regard to foreign policy, the new government's directives emphasized trade and investment and became very similar to those of its neighbor to the south. With that, cultural diplomacy was practically discontinued.

This changed the rules of the game completely for the ICCS: all systems of incentives disappeared, leaving Canadian studies worldwide in a state of uncertainty. In April 2012, Stephen Harper's by-then-majority government decided to completely cut the ICCS system of scholarships and subsidies, and therefore that of Canadian studies. The amount cut, previously earmarked for these programs, came to Can\$1.9 million of the MAECI budget, a figure completely insignificant in the government's overall objective of reducing the budget deficit.⁵

Canada is a country that enjoys "good economic health" despite the severe crisis that has battered its main trade partner, the United States, since 2007. This is why a budget cut like the one described here is not justifiable on its own. For example, in the G-7, Canada's impeccable economic performance despite the 2007-2008 world economic contraction has stood out. This allowed it to emerge unscathed from the recession, in contrast with the majority of the developed economies. In 2009, the year of sharpest crisis, Canada's GDP suffered a -2.5 percent contraction.

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Fortunately, by 2010, it once again registered 3.1-percent growth, more than twice that of France (1.5 percent), Italy (1.3 percent), and even the United States (2.8 percent). By 2011, the Canadian government reported a budget deficit of Can\$33.4 billion, 40 percent less than the previous year (Can\$55.6 billion).⁶ These results show that the Canadian economy has progressed in cleaning up its finances.

So, why put an end to a program that was successful for more than 30 years? Why end a program that helped people understand Canada and Quebec, and thus contributed to the development of research networks about this country?

CONCLUSION

Since 2008, the Stephen Harper government has suspended programs and incentives for Canadian artists, eliminating the Prom Art Program (Can\$4.7 million), which allowed Canadian artists to promote their work abroad. Others also disappeared, like the National Program for Education in Film and Video, the Canadian Independent Film and Video Fund, and the Trust for the Preservation of Music (Can\$9.7 million), among others.⁷

So, Canadian diplomacy is now oriented toward emerging markets, and, as I mentioned, a new global strategy that reinforces trade and investment. The ICCS will hold its next meeting in July amidst a great deal of hopelessness, since it

is dying. To prevent its disappearance a series of important structural changes would be required.⁸ However, everything seems to indicate that the Harper government is not considering changing its cultural policy, nor is a change in administration expected in the short term. This means that, in order to continue its work of more than 30 years, the ICCS will have to use its savings and all its inventiveness to survive. **MM**

NOTES

¹ For more details about the ICCS, see <http://www.iccs-ciec.ca>.

² Paul André Linteau, *Histoire du Canada* (Paris: PUF, 2010), p. 111, *Que sais-je?* Collection.

³ Serge Jaumain, *The Canadianist. The ICCS/25 Years in the Service of Canadian Studies* (Ottawa: International Council for Canadian Studies/ Foreign Affairs Canada, 2006).

⁴ Canadian Council for International Co-operation, "Canada's Foreign Policy: Principles and Priorities for the Future. A Report of the Special Joint Committee Reviewing Canadian Foreign Policy," Ottawa, 1994, p. 3, <https://idl-bnc.idrc.ca/dspace/bitstream/10625/30370/1/114733.pdf>.

⁵ Ginette Chenard, "Études canadiennes aux États-Unis—Une autre décision regrettable," *Le Devoir*, May 25, 2012, <http://www.ledevoir.com/politique/canada/350826/une-autre-decision-regrettable>.

⁶ Department of Finance Canada, "Annual Financial Report of the Government of Canada Fiscal Year 2010-2011," <http://www.fin.gc.ca/afr-rfa/2011/index-eng.asp>.

⁷ "La fin de la diplomatie culturelle? Les attachés culturels sont de plus en plus rares dans les ambassades du Canada," *Le Devoir*, July 19, 2012, <http://www.ledevoir.com/politique/canada/354921/la-fin-de-la-diplomatie-culturelle>.

⁸ This article was given to the editors before this ICCS meeting was to be held. [Editor's Note.]