

OPINION

Hill Times

The usefulness of relevant knowledge: the Naylor Expert Panel revisited

By [PAUL DUFOUR](#) MAY. 7, 2018

While the Naylor expert panel may have missed some opportunities to weigh in on other challenges affecting Canada's complex knowledge governance structures, we can address some of these other critical gaps underscored by the panel.



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and chief science adviser Mona Nemer, pictured on Sept. 26, 2017, the day he announced her appointment to the top job. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

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OTTAWA—We suggest that government funding of basic research should emphasize quality rather than quantity—that the social sciences, multidisciplinary efforts, and projects relevant to Canadian needs should get higher priority (Senate Special Committee on Science Policy, 1977). It's been just over a year since Canada's Fundamental Science Review report was published with much fanfare. It was inspired by the Lamontagne Senate Committee work of 40 years ago. Given the pedigree of the panel, expectations were high on how it would be received this time.

Fortunately, someone listened. The federal budget of 2018 responded to a number of its 35 recommendations, including, of course, key elements of the research ecosystem. Needless to say, the significant investments for the granting councils received the most attention by both media and the knowledge communities alike.

It's a generally happy story.

But the expert panel report also made some other key recommendations that will need further response if so-called 'ecosystem' benefits are to follow.

For starters, the report argues for a new National Advisory Council on Research and Innovation (NCRI) to replace the moribund, largely confidential body appointed by the previous administration. Clearly, when implemented, this new organization can be helpful not only to the science and innovation ministers, but to the chief science adviser in her work centred on ensuring that evidence is considered when government makes critical public policy decisions. As the Naylor report noted, the proposed NCRI could give ongoing advice on the effectiveness of both extramural research agencies and intramural research groups and facilitation of collaboration among them.

Further, the report flags increased federal-provincial-territorial collaboration as essential if Canada is to speak effectively on the international stage and take advantage of the key strengths in various areas. Many of these are identified in the Council of Canadian Academies' recent report on the state of science and industrial research and development. This shared agenda of pan-Canadian collaboration is critical if the country is to meet increasingly 'intermestic' challenges that require joined up efforts to address serious matters affecting society, economy and environment, both here and abroad. Canada had such an effort triggered in 1987 when all jurisdictions signed on to its first—and only—National S&T Strategy. As the then science minister said about the previous situation of developing S&T strategies, “A principal pitfall was that many well-intentioned efforts were unilateral, ignoring the political structure of Canada, and the complexities of our economy.”

Today, there are indications that increasing cooperation is necessary with a well-articulated pan-northern science approach of the three territories and bilateral initiatives with a growing Ontario-Quebec research corridor, for example. And the recently released visionary, national Inuit strategy on research will go some ways to addressing one of the Naylor recommendations for long-term meaningful partnerships and support from the granting councils with Indigenous and community-based knowledge systems. But more needs to be done.

Another related matter has been Canada's inability to structure decision-making guidelines for supporting engagement in so-called big science or major research facilities. These have been traditionally handled on an ad hoc basis, often with political rather than strategic motive, and with little regard for how these facilities fit into the overall research landscape, not to mention global linkages. An attempt was made to address this under the previous national science adviser to the prime minister, but was lost when that office was terminated. The Naylor panel picked this up and argued for a special standing committee on major

research facilities to be convened by the CSA so as to better advise the government on coordination and guidance for the life cycle of these large infrastructures. Addressing this properly will also require a more activist role for science diplomacy in ensuring international partnerships.

To be sure, some effort is underway to pick up elements of these recommendations, and while the Naylor expert panel may have missed some opportunities to weigh in on other challenges affecting Canada's complex knowledge governance structures, we can at least look forward to further action by all concerned to address some of these other critical gaps underscored by the panel.

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