

THE FUTURE OF THE CPSA (ANNUAL MEETING):
Five Theses

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Introduction:

As I was the one who tried to turn the committee's attention to the larger question of the purpose of the CPSA itself, I feel it is incumbent on me to explain my position in greater detail (and under separate cover from the report submitted, with which, it should be noted, I have no fundamental disagreements). To this end, I should like to proceed by outlining my views in terms of a series of five distinct but inter-related theses:

Thesis One:

Answers to questions regarding the future of the CPSA annual meeting - and similarly the CPSA journal, the *CJPS* - cannot be adequately formulated except in relation to the larger question of the role and future of the CPSA itself.

Thesis Two:

The CPSA as it has existed over the past several decades should be understood in the same terms as the Universities which housed the Political Scientists to be served by the association. As Readings has argued, Universities traditionally were derivative of and inextricably linked to the project of "nation-building". The latter was central to the post-war social contract and was manifest in the expansion of the welfare-state and its attendant institutions, including the University. In Readings' terms, the University drew

its legitimacy from culture, which names the synthesis of teaching and research, process and product, history and reason, philology and criticism, historical scholarship and aesthetic experience, the institutions and the individual... Object and process unite organically and the place they unite is the University, which thus gives the people an idea of the nation-state to live up to and the nation-state a people capable of living up to that idea..¹

¹Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 65. But see Desmond Morton, "The *University* is Theory: *Universities* are Facts", *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Fall 97, Vol. 66, No. 4, 593.

Thesis Three:

Canada's politico-economic elite - like the elites of other advanced capitalist states - has, for all intents and purposes, abandoned the nation-building project. However else it may be defined, globalization involves shift from a perspective which sees a country's citizens as thriving or failing together (all in the same boat, if not in the same kind of quarters) to an individualist global-competitiveness view (where, to quote Margaret Thatcher, "there is no such thing as society") in which national populations hold value for elites only to the extent to which they serve the material interests of the latter.

Thesis Four:

As a consequence, national culture (reflective of and a crucial support to the project of nation-building) is at an end. So too, following Readings, is the relevance of the Humboldtian model of the University as "producer, protector and inculcator of an idea of national culture". Irrelevant as well is the idea of a distinctly **Canadian** political science, and its attendant association - the CPSA.

Thesis Five:

In such a context, the association has two options. The first is to re-orient itself to being the Association of the Politics of Canada. In this case, the association could attempt to regain some relevance by giving up its goal of serving all political scientists in Canada, and by directing itself instead to serving as a "clearing house" for political scientists who study Canadian politics. In practice, the CPSA and its organs (annual meeting; *CJPS*) have already made this transition; the striking lack of participation by political scientists whose first priority is IR, Comparative, or Theory (and whose relevant organizations are things like the ISA, APSA and IPSA) has already been noted elsewhere. Nor will these scholars be easily enticed back. The annual meeting of the CPSA may remain important for those with "something to say about Canada" - it will remain an afterthought, however, for those with something to say about globalization, the state or citizenship that has more general applicability. (The exception is, of course, graduate students, who will continue to see the CPSA annual meeting as the place to "hone their presentation skills" before advancing to venues - e.g., ISA, APSA - that are more critical to their academic careers.²) And even for those with a substantive interest in Canadian politics, the very fact that Canada itself is an increasingly irrelevant preoccupation in the Brave New World of global competitiveness would seem to doom the annual meeting to the dustbin of history, notwithstanding an effort to recast its focus in more narrow terms.

²It is interesting to note that success in obtaining an SSHRC Research Grant is, to a considerable extent, a function of whether or not one's research output enjoys "international recognition". It is a sad but no less true observation that no one has ever succeeded in achieving such recognition through presentations at the CPSA annual meeting.

The second option involves a re-orientation as well, but of a qualitatively different type. Here the CPSA would attempt to regain relevance with Canadian political scientists more generally by organizing itself to serve a new “national project”. This, however, is a not inconsiderable challenge. The project of nation-building no longer enjoying the support of Canada’s elites, the CPSA no longer has the luxury of taking its lead, in derivative fashion, from those same elites.

Accordingly, the project of nation-building can no longer be pursued unless coupled with a critically-oriented effort to expose the degree to which Canada’s politico-economic elite has abandoned the post-war social compromise in favour of promoting the interests of the business class. Here the orientation for the association would be to defend the nation-building project, not derivatively, but oppositionally. Put simply, the association’s energies would need to be directed to opposing the agenda of those Canadians who enjoy power and privilege - an agenda which is to the detriment of their fellow citizens, who do not.

Of course, it would be hard to square such an orientation with a commitment to a “value-free” political science. It is, however, the kind of “inconsistency” that may be worth accommodating.

In sum, I submit for consideration the idea that the only hope for the long-term viability of the Canadian Political Science Association is that the association orient itself to promoting a distinctly **political** Canadian political science - one practiced in solidarity with policy-takers and one willing to stand in critical opposition to Canada’s policy-makers.