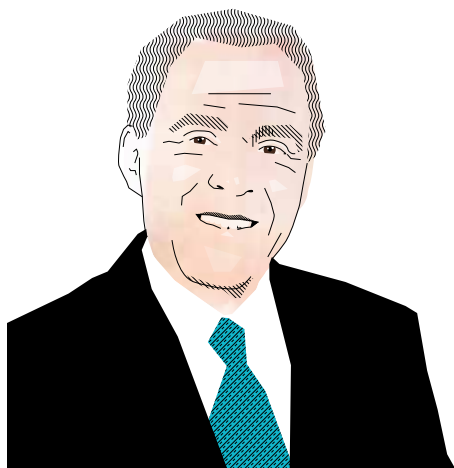


REVERSING THE BRAIN DRAIN

Eliot Phillipson, President and CEO of the Canada Foundation for Innovation, is at the helm of a national effort to establish Canada as one of the best places in the world to conduct research.



Since its creation in 1997, the Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI) has played an instrumental role in stopping and reversing the “brain drain” in the Canadian research community during the 1980s and early 1990s by investing in state-of-the-art equipment and infrastructure. Between 2000 and 2006, Canadian universities recruited more than 8,000 new faculty members and retained some of the country’s stellar researchers due in part to CFI-funded equipment and infrastructure. Forty per cent of these researchers were recruited from outside the country, and many were returning Canadians.

Frontier spoke with Dr. Eliot Phillipson, President and CEO of the CFI, about the economic downturn, U.S. President Obama’s funding for science, and his best CFI moment.

FRONTIER: How has CFI’s mandate been challenged by the economic downturn?

EP: The CFI received \$600 million in the 2009 federal budget so the CFI is in good shape for our next major competition into the year 2010, but with 60 per cent of the cost of research infrastructure and equipment coming from funding partners, we recognize the challenges the current economic climate places on our provincial and institutional partners.

FRONTIER: Despite the fiscal challenges, the Obama administration has increased funding to the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health. What should Canada do to keep our research community competitive?

EP: Compared to what I call the “dark ages” of Canadian research funding in the 1980s and early 1990s, I think everyone recognizes that for the past decade, we’ve been building a strong research community here while the Bush administration was almost anti-science. The very fact that Obama speaks in such positive terms of the role of science has created a buzz about science that wasn’t there before.

I don’t think scientists will simply pick up and move south, assuming they have everything they need to conduct their

research here – and that’s what we’ve striven for, to provide not just functional, but state-of-the-art equipment. That said, we can’t ignore the psychological effect of this “mood change” in the U.S. If researchers here feel that the next round of funding may be more restrictive, they may sense that things are rosier south of the border. So we need to continue to support and advocate for research funding.

FRONTIER: What are the CFI accomplishments you are most proud of?

EP: When I visit institutions and researchers we’ve funded, the common theme of the feedback I receive from these new, often young faculty members has been that they have better equipment than their former supervisors and colleagues at great institutions in the U.S. or Europe. And better equipment means they can compete with the best of the world, and help position Canada as a leader in global innovation.

Through not only CFI but other federal research funding programs, we have been able to re-invigorate our university research and restore a lot of enthusiasm and optimism in the future of Canadian research. That’s something that we as a country can be very proud of. ■

