

## CANADIAN SOCIAL SCIENCE

# Funding Council Hopes Plan Offers Port in Political Storm

OTTAWA—Canada's Social Sciences & Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) is the nation's leading source of funds for academic research on the human condition. But a series of events—including an attempt to eliminate the council, attacks on its budget and awards, and a bitter internal feud that ended in the ouster of its president—is forcing it to focus as much attention on its own condition as on the portfolio it manages. The council's backers are hoping that a new 5-year strategic plan unveiled last month will shore up political support for its activities. But observers say the problems run deeper and that its fate hinges on the performance of its next group of leaders.

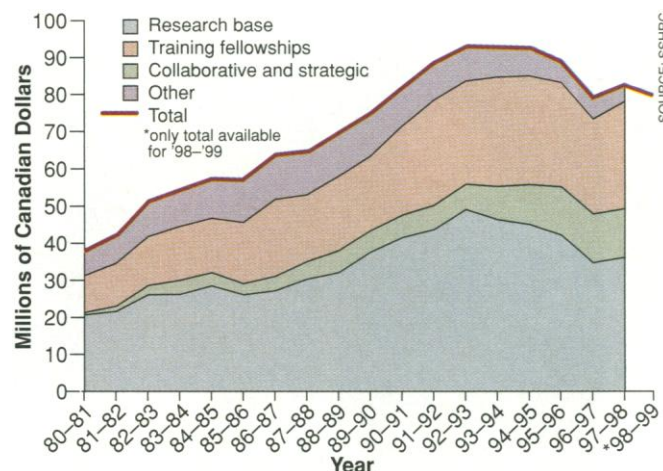
The SSHRC is led by a board of political appointees—culled primarily from academic circles—that sets policy directions and divvies up a \$58 million pie for social sciences research. Traditionally the most fragile link in the country's chain of research-funding councils, SSHRC saw its political fortunes hit a low point 4 years ago when the Conservative government tried unsuccessfully to eradicate it as part of a cost-saving plan that included killing several dozen agencies. Its low profile and tenuous contribution to the nation's economic well-being had made it an especially ripe target.

But the council has fared little better under the Liberal government that was elected shortly after a band of legislators, using complicated political maneuvers in Parliament's upper chamber, rescued SSHRC from oblivion. The government's campaign to shrink the federal deficit soon translated into a 14% reduction in SSHRC's budget over 3 years (see table). The 1993 election also brought to Ottawa 52 members of the right-wing Reform Party. In attacks reminiscent of the Golden Fleece awards handed out by a former U.S. senator, the party routinely culls the SSHRC grant lists for examples of what it regards as "wasteful" research outlays, flagging titles such as "The lesbian influence on Greek poetry."

And then there is the damage done by its friends. Morale was already low when Lynn Penrod, a literature professor and administrator at the University of Alberta, was named to a 5-year stint as SSHRC president in mid-1994. Almost from the moment of her appointment, board members grumbled privately—none would speak on the record—that Penrod wasn't politically well plugged in and wasn't working effectively with either the staff or other advocates for the social

sciences to solidify support for the organization. The dissatisfaction reached a boiling point last October, according to government and council sources, when 19 of the 21 council members told Science Minister Jon Gerrard that they would resign on the spot if he didn't remove Penrod.

Gerrard temporarily stemmed the revolt by promising to resolve the problem quickly, and government sources say he then weighed two options—removing Penrod or firing the entire board. Eventually, the sources say, he decided that the latter step might doom the institution itself, and at the board's January meeting



**Off base.** The council's base research program has borne the brunt of recent funding cuts.

Penrod announced that she was resigning, effective 30 June. "We didn't really know who was wrong or right," says one government official. "But if somebody comes into an emergency ward and [is] bleeding, ... first, you're going to try and stop the hemorrhaging."

Penrod's successor is expected to be named shortly, to be followed over the coming year by an entirely new board as the 3-year terms of current members expire. The planned makeover, according to one government official, is needed to ensure that the new president isn't saddled with a board prone to "childish" antics.

Penrod and Gerrard decline to discuss details of the controversy. Gerrard says Penrod decided to move on after "admirably" performing her job. "We wish her the best," he adds. Penrod just says "I announced I was going. That's the end of the story." The one board member willing to speak openly about the dispute says its origins remain a puzzle to her.

"You ask me what was the triggering event, and I couldn't tell you," says Monique Jérôme-Forget, president of the Montreal-based Public Policy Research Institute, who resigned in December to protest her colleagues' attempt to oust Penrod. "It was mass hysteria."

This internal bickering has cast a long shadow over the agency. "I don't think people realize how serious the damage has been," says one longtime player in Ottawa's science scene. "SSHRC has been totally marginalized." Even noble-sounding objectives like increased collaboration with other science agencies will be extremely hard to achieve, he predicts, because "it will take years to rebuild SSHRC's image."

Social scientists are hoping, however, that the new 5-year plan will provide the starting point for rebuilding the organization's reputation. Even if the council is put in new hands, the current board members say they expect the thrust of the plan to be followed.

"I can't imagine that the work that has gone into this strategic plan will be suddenly and abruptly junked and we'll go off in a different direction," says SSHRC vice president and York University historian Paul Lovejoy.

Unlike the previous strategic plan, which emphasized training issues, the new document—entitled "Striking the Balance"—places much greater weight on social scientists' role in meeting societal needs. It would telescope the bulk of SSHRC's existing grant programs into only two

categories of competition: open (investigator-initiated research) and targeted ("networked" projects in selected theme areas). Accompanying that change will be a requirement that grant applicants make a compelling case that their research is of "strategic" importance to the discipline or the nation. Penrod says the changes will allow SSHRC to stay within its budget while better demonstrating the value of social sciences research: "We have to be careful that we aren't trying to be all things for all people ... while also showing the importance of research leading to [improved] quality of life in Canada."

But skeptics believe that it will require a steady hand at the helm to steer social science research in Canada into calmer political waters. Says one observer: "Sanity has to be restored at the council."

—Wayne Kondro

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