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Commentary Series

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RIIM

Research on Immigration and Integration in the Metropolis

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Banquet Speech for Vancouver 10th National Metropolis Conference: March 25, 2006

Thank you very much.

It has been a long time since I last stood up at a Metropolis conference to share my thoughts and to express my hopes for the Project.

Some of you may have been celebrating this fact... but tonight it is the price you'll need to pay to enjoy this excellent British Columbia hospitality and free booze.

Now, I have to confess that when Dan invited me to be the post-dinner speaker, I had misgivings.

After plenary-filled mornings and workshop-stuffed afternoons, crowds get ugly.

I told Dan that I'd seen what people do to Ministers of the Crown at dinner speeches, so what chance did I have as a retiree?

Well, Dan had to admit that I had a point, but he insisted that all would be well if I kept it light and tried for different angles.

Now, fortunately, at the time the invitation came, I was reading a book that some of you may have stumbled across, called *The Third Chimpanzee: The Evolution and Future of the Human Animal*, by Jared Diamond.

And I had just finished a particularly interesting chapter that starts out with Jared asking the reader to guess which among the following ape species – gorillas, chimpanzees, orangutans or humans – has the largest testicles.

Now when I picked this entry point into my talk, I knew three things.

First, that I would probably have your attention;

Second, that it might put some of you off your dinner;

And, third, that it would likely make our hosts very, very nervous.

So you'll need to trust me here. And hope that I don't cross the line.

I'd like to read you a brief passage from Diamond's book. He says, and I quote:

“Sex organs don’t exist in isolation. They are adapted to their owners’ social habits and life cycle, which are in turn adapted to their food-gathering habits.”

In other words, to understand why some apes have bigger testicles than others, you can’t just look at the apes in isolation.

Instead, you have to look at the purpose that those testicles serve...not just in mating or display...but in the larger environment in which the animals live.

Now most of us in this room are social scientists or social policymakers, but let’s pretend for a few moments that we’re really socio-biologists – Diane Fossey and Jane Goodall – and that we’re here to study those fascinating creatures who occupy the terrain we call Metropolis.

What we want to know is how the Project has managed to thrive for nearly twelve years; why it numbers hundreds if not thousands of participants; and how it manages to bind members from four different continents.

We want to know this so we can make the Project better but, as socio-biologists, we know the importance of examining not just the specimens but also their ecosystem... the Metropolis ecosystem.

The proposition is this: That to understand Metropolis and to take it forward, we must first understand the different interests it serves, the uses to which it’s put and the tensions it houses.

So sip your coffee and bear with me while I sketch a few of these interests in ways that, I hope, resonate.

I’ll start with the federal policy community – the six or seven or perhaps more federal departments that core fund the Project and contract for research and conferences. What are their needs and, hence, their interests?

Well, knowledge, to be sure.

The members of the consortium all agree that:

- Immigration is complex.
- Immigration is important.
- Sound policymaking requires sound research.
- And, there is not enough in-house research capacity.

For this, of course, you don’t need Jane Goodall. But here are four other interests that Jane, if she were with us, might identify.

First: Metropolis delivers critical partnerships!

How? By creating trust.

Because immigration straddles boundaries, to be managed successfully, it has to be managed co-operatively.

But, cooperation requires trust – trust between departments ... trust between federal and provincial governments...and trust between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and officials.

Metropolis creates trust.

It does so through events like this one, which give different communities an opportunity to work together on issues that matter.

And it does so by creating a shared evidentiary base:
...we don't need to have the same goals and we don't need to have the same values... but we absolutely must have a shared understanding of the situation we're in... and how it can be altered, so we can haggle, trade and compromise.

Second: Metropolis lends credibility to immigration and diversity policymaking... and it does so in a way that in-house research cannot.

Not because in-house research is of lower quality but because internal government research simply cannot shake off the suspicion of funded intimacy.

Metropolis, because it's seen as independent...because it's transparent...bolsters the credibility of the policy process with the media, with the public, with stakeholders, with the Treasury Board of Canada when resources are sought and even at the political level, when Ministers confront their colleagues across jurisdictional or party lines.

The same holds internationally, which is one of the reasons why the Project has enjoyed superb relations with successive Ministers, since its earliest days.

Third: Metropolis brings practitioners into the policy process in a serious manner.

And, it does so in two ways:

- (i) By giving practitioners an important channel to communicate their views; and
- (ii) Most importantly, by enhancing their capacity to develop and advocate their positions.

Now, I'm not implying here that before Metropolis, practitioners could only screech and hoot.

But I am saying that while governments have become more reliant on NGOs to deliver services, they have been reluctant to fund core organizational capacities such as planning and research.

Metropolis has been helping to rectify this situation, as I'm sure half a dozen NGOs in the room would confirm.

Fourth: Metropolis complements the managerial structures of the federal bureaucracy.

Senior bureaucrats in Ottawa are managers, not scientists, with careers that are dominated by frequent job changes.

This is well and good... but high job mobility means that scientific knowledge is constantly lost and must be reproduced in each successive generation of officials.

This knowledge can't be housed by institutions that are dominated by a managerial culture.

Instead, it has to be safeguarded within scientific institutions... like Metropolis.

Now, we could go on to identify other policy interests that Metropolis serves... things like prestige, international connections and so forth... but because time is short, I'd like, now, to leave behind the bureaucrats and to turn our attention to another set of primates – well represented here – the academic community.

So we'll wave good-bye to Jane Goodall and we'll trek our way through dense underbrush, up steep, slippery slopes to where our academic friends live and where they are closely observed by Diane Fosse.

And, once again, we direct our attention to the complex interests that Metropolis serves.

Now, non-anthropologists might start this list of academic interests by saying 'money' for researchers. And, indeed, there's some truth to this... but it's not in the obvious "divide-up-the-kill" way that first suggests itself to untrained observers.

To understand why you need only do the math: Once the annual Metropolis contribution has been divided among five centers, overheads and necessities, the balance – available for distribution among the enormous number of participants – is far less impressive that first appears...

.... and, for sure, not enough to explain the level and intensity of scholarly work that Metropolis commands.

No... the real monetary interest that Metropolis serves rests with SSHRC which has a symbiotic relationship with the Project.

Metropolis is one of the more important ways in which SSHRC demonstrates its social responsibility and commitment to policy development. In fact, it's an important part of SSHRC's strategy to persuade the government to fund the social sciences and humanities on a par with scientific, engineering and medical research.

Metropolis also serves the interests of universities who, like SSHRC, are keen to demonstrate that their stores of knowledge can be mobilized to benefit the communities in which they're embedded.

Here, the Centres are poster children:

...The management and advisory structures that the Centres operate really do work, bringing academics together with community leaders, service providers and policymakers from all levels of government.

...And they ground academic research in the needs of immigrants and their hosts, thus building social capital.

The list goes on. Here are some other interests that Metropolis serves:

- Metropolis provides researchers with important opportunities to meet colleagues and to develop pan-Canadian and international research projects.
- Metropolis has given researchers an opportunity to work across disciplinary lines.
- Metropolis has attracted high quality graduate students and has generated new teaching programs.
- Metropolis has produced links between researchers and policy officials, creating contract alternatives to grant-based research.

I'll stop here but I want to underline that the list of interests served by Metropolis could easily be extended for both policymakers and academics.

And similar lists could be developed for NGOs, for graduate students, for politicians and for provincial and municipal players who are active in Metropolis, British Columbia being an important example.

I don't however want to try your patience and I do want to say something about the future and what it will take to move the Project to the next level.

So let's bid farewell to the socio-biologists but let's keep in mind the complex, entangled environment in which we're operating.

It's in this context that I offer three suggestions for driving Metropolis forward:

Suggestion # 1: Make research more accessible.

As researchers and policymakers, you can do this in several ways:

- (i) By framing questions so they more clearly identify and address specific policy concerns;
- (ii) By compiling the evidence from small-scale studies and producing syntheses that carry weight; and
- (iii) By investing in intermediaries and translators... people whose job it is to mine the science and to explain the implications of research for actual or potential policies.

This is all about lowering the thresholds of accessibility.

Suggestion # 2: Boost investment.

You must remember that Metropolis is a tool and not a product. You will get out what you put in – in fact, multiples of what you put in – but you must invest in the things that Metropolis needs most – not cash but attention. And time. Time interacting with researchers. Time interacting with policymakers and practitioners.

Neither side can do it alone.

One hand clapping – whether it's a policy hand or a research hand – produces nothing but silence.

My preferred solution involves mandatory performance commitments by senior research and policy officials – Assistant Deputy Ministers and Directors General – of time, analyzing research and attending events like this one... commitments both for themselves and their staff.

And to make sure the commitments are taken seriously, I would include them in government human resource plans and performance contracts.

This would ensure that research is not just ornamental.

Suggestion # 3: Resist the idea that research is equivalent to evaluation.

Knowledge mobilization is not the same as grabbing and FedExing tidy packets of information, gleaned from research, to policymakers.

This is not where the real value lies.

Metropolis is about learning.

Coming away from a conference with new frameworks, better questions and new ideas is far more important than producing and receiving packets of information.

To paraphrase a famous adage, Metropolis is about lighting fires, not filling buckets.

So, to everyone in the room... and here I'm wrapping up:

We, in Canada, are running a unique social experiment. And here I'm no longer referring to Metropolis, but to immigration.

There are few international parallels to our program which, by almost any standards, has been uniquely successful.

Now, it would be nice to claim all of our success for deliberate policy and management, but – and here I speak as an insider – luck has had a lot more to do with our success than most of us would care to admit.

Luck, though, has a way of running out.

So if we think that all we need to guarantee our future is to replicate our past, we will be gravely disappointed.

To be successful, we will need new ideas and better understandings and we will need to work together... to share what we know... and to shape what's ahead.

Metropolis can play a key role in this future.

So, my final message is very simple:

You're in this together – so try to play nicely. Because we're all sharing the same jungle gym.

And for those of you who still want the answer to Jared Diamond's question, you'll have to ask after the talk.

Thank you.

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