



A CULTURE OF INNOVATION, FROM SPINDLE'S SENIOR ADVISOR, DR. MARK POZNANSKY



How many times have you heard that what Canada really needs is to foster a “Culture of Innovation”. It’s a refrain that’s been repeated over and over again over the past quarter century and probably more. And in words, and programs (although not always well thought out), governments and virtually every political platform has stressed that need. It seems that all will be better, our society will be better and our economy will prosper, if we can just arrive at that “cultural nirvana”. But what does it really mean and if it’s a destination, how do we actually get there?

Many have used the phrase “Culture of Innovation” and some scoff at the notion as too overused and almost a cliché. But I like the phrase. To me it has real meaning – especially if you can adhere to a meaningful definition.

I especially like the definition put forward by Nicola Hepburn, Ph.D. candidate in 2013 in Political Science at the University of Toronto. I like it because I think it fits well with what Canada needs.

“A culture of innovation is an environment that supports creative thinking and advances efforts to extract economic and social value from knowledge, and, in doing so, generates new or improved products, services or processes”



If we stick to that definition for a moment, we can say that a culture of innovation is not just about

1. outstanding discovery research in outstanding universities
2. effective intellectual protection, the number of patents and the number of university “spin-offs”
3. how Government supports the spectrum of innovation from university research through to tax and other incentives for research-intensive SMEs
4. the presence of financial instruments, including venture capital in support of start-ups, SMEs and established companies
5. the strength of an entrepreneurial class of managers prepared to generate new products
6. receptors (both public and private) who are prepared to innovate by buying into the points above
7. companies, universities or governments acquiring the most up-to-date innovative technologies

In fact, it’s about all of those. And it’s about them all working together and in concert to create common objectives in pursuit of that “culture”.

So how will we know if and when Canada has developed a true culture of innovation?

Well, to start with Canada is not without its successes—having developed a number of significant innovation-driven islands. A good example is the city of Waterloo, where an important fraction of the economy is based on a culture of innovation coming out of the University of Waterloo, its co-op program and its private-public sector initiative, Communitech, that helps high tech start-ups to grow to successful home-grown companies such as AIC, OpenText and Blackberry. In fact, we are starting to see established companies that are flocking to Waterloo, such as Google, Microsoft and Amazon, to take advantage of its “Culture”. And this snowballs as successful entrepreneurs such as Mike Lazarides, invest in institutes such as The Perimeter Institute which continues to feed this culture.

On a smaller scale, but equally as interesting, MaRS Discovery District in Toronto represents a sort of microcosm – a series of buildings in downtown Toronto dedicated to the high tech start up scene. MaRS is not only embracing, but utilizing a solid culture of innovation. Young entrepreneurs are setting up IT and Biotech companies surrounding innovative technologies and discoveries emanating largely from Toronto-based universities and colleges. And money and external interests (e.g. Johnson and Johnson, Autodesk, Facebook and a number of American venture capital firms) are making their home there, trolling for good investment opportunities.



But for the most part, Canada's economy is still very much dependent on natural resources and we remain a country, to use a well-worn cliché, of Hewers of Wood and Drawers of Water, and still very dependent on advanced manufacturing and especially the automotive industry here in Ontario.

We will know that the drive to have a culture of innovation has succeeded when there are larger pockets of this country's economy driven by INNOVATION:

When parents encourage their children to study SCIENCE so they'll be able to get good jobs.

When our newspapers and job sites are filled with advertisements for science-based jobs.

When our financial houses are as concerned with their science-based investments as they are with their resource-based investments.

When our government officials finally understand and embrace SCIENCE as the hallmark of a new Canada Economy.

Only then will we have developed a true CULTURE OF INNOVATION.

Mark J. Poznansky is a Senior Advisor with Spindle. He was formerly the CEO of Ontario Genomics – a provincial genomics-focused enabler – which he led from 2010 to 2017. During his tenure, he established the organization as a visionary and forward-thinking advocate for genomics-enabled technological and industrial transformation. He established a pioneering demand-pull model to facilitate the uptake of home-grown genomics innovations into local and global agriculture, water, mining, forestry and energy sectors and created mechanisms for securing millions in federal and industry funds in support of Ontario's genomics research. Previously he ran his own consultancy group offering a range of services including program reviews, strategic planning, change management and leadership training to clients in government, hospitals, universities and the private sector. He served as President and Scientific Director of Robarts Research Institute (London, Ontario) from 1993 to 2007, over which time the institute increased its staff from 100 to over 600, increased its annual research funding from \$10 million to over \$40 million, and developed a reputation for business development by spinning out seven different companies, including Viron Therapeutics, where Dr. Poznansky served as President and CEO. He has also served on the Merck USA Scientific Advisory Leadership Team, acted as Associate Dean of Medicine for Research at the University of Alberta and held faculty positions at the University of Western Ontario, University of Alberta and Harvard University. Dr. Poznansky has published over 80 research papers. He has served as Chair of Let's Talk Science, Chief Science Advisor to the CEO of the Thunder Bay Regional Research Institute and on the board of the Innovation Institute of Ontario. He was a founding member and past chair of the Council for Health Research in Canada, and chaired the Scientific Advisory Boards of the Canadian Medical Discoveries Fund and MDS Capital Corp. He has also served as a member of numerous science-related committees including the Science Advisory Committee of the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada and the Medical Research Council of Canada Grants panel. Dr. Poznansky was made a member of the Order of Ontario in 2004 and the Order of Canada in 2005. Earning his bachelor's degree and PhD at McGill University, Dr. Poznansky completed postdoctoral training at Harvard Medical School.