

John Robson: MPs Should Get Back to Basics Like National Security and the Budget

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The chamber of the House of Commons is seen from the Speaker's chair on Sept. 12, 2024. The Canadian Press/Adrian Wyld



By John Robson

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Commentary

As you are doubtless unaware, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Science and Research is currently pondering “the impact of the criteria for awarding federal funding on research excellence in Canada.” To which I respond: Even if they knew a lot more about it than they do, is it really a productive use of their time?

I do mean respond, as I’ve inexplicably been asked to speak briefly to the committee. But in case my presentation is ditched as not



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representing bold orthodoxy, let me also speak to you citizens and taxpayers about why, instead of refining those criteria, MPs should scrap them and all the funding.

First, legislators are the key link between citizens and government, the only people we elect in the whole vast state apparatus. Which is currently caroming out of control. So they should be peering into the public accounts, not test tubes. Second, our universities are a hideous mess unlikely to be fixed by more of the same, namely subsidies linked to a far-left agenda.

If you’re thinking education is explicitly provincial under our Constitution, you’re right. But somehow the feds [spend an estimated \\$15.7 billion](#) or so annually on the post-secondary kind, so abolishing that funding would immediately help revitalize our moribund federalism.

Also, a core government duty is to safeguard the national finances. Since ours are in catastrophic condition, from massive deficits to this baroque Christmas tax break estimated to [save the average person \\$4.51](#) while costing firms millions to administer, MPs should put that \$15 billion back in the kitty and start studying tax codes, not genetic codes.

An even more fundamental government duty is defending the realm. Yet [we are helpless in the Arctic](#), and generally, in an increasingly turbulent dangerous world. Never mind antimatter. Get us some ammunition, and someone to fire it.

Another crucial federal responsibility is infrastructure. Yet Via Rail **consumes** subsidies exceeding \$1,000 *per passenger* while trains run comically late, and ministers hail **International Civil Aviation Day** while our airports have lousy WiFi and lack plugs. And while the executive bloviates about “the human right to clean drinking water for First Nations” and “long-term sustainable funding ... to ensure clean drinking water for generations to come,” we really have boil advisories for generations. So forget heavy water. Fix tap water.

Then there’s the threat of **curtailing** Federal Court hearings because of a funding “crisis.” Nothing is more fundamental to peace, order, and good government than justice, except defence. But it’s collapsing, like virtually every important aspect of governance, although (or because) federal spending ballooned from under \$300 billion a decade ago to **over half a trillion now**, and the federal public service swelled a **baffling 40 percent**.

MPs need to make it stop, not help devise a Canadian bilingual ChatBot. Of course, the universities say give us money or the economy gets it. But as Adam Smith said a quarter of a *millennium* ago, people who call for state aid in the national interest are by no means such fools as those who believe them.

Also, as John Stuart Mill warned in “On Liberty” a century and a half ago, when the state involves itself in delivering education it becomes “a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another” and establishing “a despotism over the mind.” Including DEI invading science. But as Jonathan Kay tartly asked, “Ok so who wants to go up on the first Oral Tradition powered rocket?” Or universities **welcoming** anti-Semitic speakers while letting thugs chase off pro-Israeli ones, or opening a “BIPoC Lounge” **only for non-whites**? Your federal tax dollars at work, folks.

Mill did want the state to require, and fund, an education for all children. But the benefits of a university education, such as they are, are fully captured by the adults who receive it, and Canada’s wealthy generous society will fund scholarships for the needy. So ideally, they’d be privatized.

That question being provincial, I'll tell federal MPs to leave it there and turn to their core duties. And, ending on a slightly more cheerful note, take about a billion of that \$15 billion and buy themselves some staff to discharge those duties properly.

Working on the Hill three decades ago, I discovered the U.S. House Budget Committee alone had over 100 staffers, senators dozens, and representatives around 20. Of course, many legislative staff do admin and constituency service. But it leaves five or 10 full-time, adult-salaried researchers to keep them informed and prompted on key issues. Our MPs don't have 10 staff total.

Neither cabinet, party leaders, nor the bureaucracy want MPs on top of issues. It makes them less docile. Better to distract them with laser beams. But we citizens need legislators focused on fundamentals, not fusion.

Right now, nobody's minding the store, and it shows.

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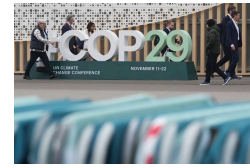
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