Interview: Roseann O’Reilly Runte – President, Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI)



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Roseann O’Reilly Runte, president of the Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI) speaks about the role and the importance of innovation in the Canadian life sciences industry and how Canada is a global leader in a number of areas.

Given your diverse background, can you tell our international audience about your motivation to pursue this leadership opportunity at CFI?

Serving the Canada Foundation for Innovation is a real privilege. It builds on my former career as the President of a number of universities and I was fortunate to work with international organisations and the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons. This experience provides a good background to lead CFI’s effort to support innovation through funding infrastructure – buildings, laboratories, scientific equipment and the like – in the universities, the hospitals and major science initiatives across the country.

Considering you are fairly new to the role, what are your impressions so far of CFI’s strategic roadmap 2012-2017, which has the aim of ensuring Canadian researchers perform at the highest level of excellence and that innovators benefit from their research?

For the past few months, I have been travelling across the country to survey the extraordinary achievements of the Canadian research community and witness the visible effects of the

investments we have made to date. CFI has existed for 20 years and in that time, we have invested, with the federal and provincial governments and others, CAD 17 billion dollars in research infrastructures across Canada, thanks to the Canadian government. Extraordinary ecosystems have been created; not only have the universities and hospitals in various towns and cities benefited and research been made more meaningful, the communities around these universities and hospitals have flourished in employment and trade.

Another extraordinarily visible aspect was the funding's impact on the students. Students that had benefited from the funding are now professors, CEOs, researchers, and so on. It is thrilling to witness the meaningful lives and contributions of these beneficiaries.

How committed has the Canadian government been in terms of funding and support innovation?

The 1997 establishment of CFI was obviously driven by the Canadian government's support of investment in innovation – and they have been funding it ever since. At that time, 'brain drain' was a serious issue for Canada: promising Canadian researchers and graduates were leaving the country to work elsewhere. We needed to create an attractive environment for these talents to build a fruitful research career here in Canada – and this was what CFI was established to support. To this end, the government has consistently invested in research infrastructure, and today, I believe we have a thriving environment that not only motivates Canadians to stay, but attracts international expertise to Canada.

Everywhere I have gone on my trip, I have met Canadians who have returned to Canada. I also met many other researchers who were born in other countries, become Canadians and are very happy to be working here.

[Featured_in]

The word 'innovation' is used a lot, and it can mean direct economic development and applied research as well as discovery research. Recently, there has been a great push for applied research, and the current government has created an infrastructure bank to encourage businesses to be innovative, as well as a big super-cluster program to bring businesses and universities together to do research that will have a direct effect on the economic growth of the country.

Another way to support innovation is by developing an educated population. The graduates of our projects have had the opportunity to work in the laboratories and to use the equipment to work in such industry. 50 percent of the Masters students go on to work in the private sector, so that

represents a direct contribution by the government.

Nevertheless, there is always more work to do. In my past capacity as president of various universities, I used to say that if we finally had enough money to do everything we wanted, it would mean that we do not have enough ideas! So, let me say – we have a lot of good ideas here.

The CFI allocates funds for large industries like aerospace, forest products and mining, as well as health and life sciences, which takes up 50 percent of investments. Why is this sector so important for Canada?

Over the last 20 years, 57 percent of the health and life sciences projects have gone to health-related initiatives, 25 percent to biomedical and medicines. Half also had research collaborative agreements with the private sector, which I think is very important.

This is a field where Canada can shine, because we have that tradition of excellence in health and life sciences research. We are a country that looks at solving the problems of society – and health is a problem that every society must tackle. In four years, we will celebrate the centennial anniversary of Canadian scientist Frederik Banting's discovery of insulin. Continuing that proud tradition of medical advancements, during the recent Ebola outbreak in Africa, Canadian researchers in Manitoba were working on a possible vaccine to stop the disease – in a laboratory that had been funded by CFI.

How does CFI decide its funding priorities?

Our review process is recognized as the gold standard internationally. Overall, applications have serious review procedures involving researchers coming from all around the world. The shortlisted projects are reviewed periodically as they are taking shape so that we can track the development.

Our competitions are national competitions and they are open to experts all over the country to promote investment across the country, instead of just being focused on the traditional hubs of Montreal and Toronto.

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We also require provincial and industrial collaboration with every project that we fund to ensure that we are directing our resources to useful endeavors.

How advanced is the Canadian public's understanding of the role and activities of CFI?

I doubt that CFI is a household name. However, if you go to almost any city and you ask about the Genome project, the Canadian light source, the Oceans Network Canada, for instance, anyone on the street will know what it is. It is really not about who we are, but what we do – and people all over the country appreciate the fruits of our labor.

The word ‘innovation’ has become extremely important across Canada. 20 years ago, I do not remember any other institution with the word ‘innovation’ in its name. Today, the word ‘innovation’ is everywhere. The meaning shifts slightly depending on with whom you are speaking, but the goal seems to be the same to me: to accomplish something ‘new’, to serve society in a ‘new’ way, to change people’s mindsets. This is not something exclusive to the domain of science.

For instance, every year, the Governor General gives out the Innovation Awards to celebrate outstanding individuals, teams and organizations for their innovative initiatives. Last year, a professor, Marie-Odile Junker was awarded one for her project to save the languages of indigenous peoples: she is creating an online dictionary of their languages accessible to everyone – not by studying as a single researcher and inputting it herself, but having the indigenous people input their words themselves! This is culturally extremely innovative.

The life sciences industry is one of the most innovative industries, investing USD 150 billion in R&D globally, and Canada is the 10th largest pharma market in the world. What role should Canada be playing in the global life sciences innovation ecosystem?

Canada has always been an internationally-oriented country. We are too small in population to be inward-looking and we have, therefore, always looked at companies and researchers around the world. Sometimes we play a small part in something that is large, but that small part is often very important.

I think the problems that the world is facing today are international problems. Our expertise should contribute to the search for a solution. Furthermore, we live in a time of networks and partnerships. There are going to be more and more global teams of researchers bringing cultures and backgrounds together to solve problems. Technology now also allows us to bridge distances easily. Canada boasts an incredible level of excellence and intelligence to contribute on an international basis.

Furthermore, across the past 150 years, Canada has built a robust reputation as a trusted, reliable and respected partner. I think our abilities are being increasingly recognized by the world.

Looking forward, what milestones would you like to achieve for your term?

I could like to continue to lead CFI in supporting excellence. My cross-country trip was motivated by my desire to reach out to researchers, scientists and academics from coast to coast to see how we can do better. Our feedback has been excellent but we hope to build on that legacy and continue to improve even further. We are in the process of outlining our strategic plan for the next five years. We not only have to continue to support innovation, we have to spark innovation within CFI itself.

We hope to look at ways to continue domestic and international partnerships, as well as support creativity and innovation in ways that have not been done so far.

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