

Report on presentation of the PAGSE brief to the HCSCF 26 Sep 2006

PAGSE was one of 7 groups making presentations in the first (10:00-11:30) session of the committee on 27 September 2006. We were last in the order of speakers. The seven presenters were:

1. Suzanne Fortier, NSERC
2. Donald Davis, Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada
3. Diane Watts, REAL Women of Canada
4. Gerald Brown, Association of Canadian Community Colleges
5. Linda Cook, Canadian Library Association
6. Peter Brenders, BIOTEC Canada
7. Ian Rutherford, PAGSE (supported by Art Olson, who had to sit on the sidelines)

The members of the committee present were Brian Pallister (chair), Massimo Pacetti (vice-chair), Pierre Paquette (vice-chair) Diane Ablonczy, Rick Dykstra, John McCallum, John McKay, Michael Savage, Thierry St-Cyr and Judy Wasylcyia-Leis.

Each presenter was given 5 minutes and all used it, some having to be cut off, including me! The seven presentations and preliminaries took until 10:40, leaving 50 minutes for discussion.

Every committee member was allowed to ask questions and some asked several. Sometimes these were addressed to a particular presenter, but sometimes, in the case of questions on R&D or S&T they were addressed to the group of three presenters on those subjects. It was in fact very useful to have both NSERC and BIOTEC at the same table since most of our positions were mutually reinforcing. I will touch only on those questions regarding R&D and S&T.

Savage asked NSERC about overhead costs and BIOTEC about its proposed national immunization strategy. In passing he mentioned that he had heard and agreed with our concerns about the decline in government R&D and monitoring capacity.

Paquette asked why, after 25 years of effort is Canada still behind in R&D, especially in private sector investment. I explained that gross expenditure on R&D as a percentage of GDP peaked in 2001 and is flat since then at about half the level of leading countries such as Sweden and Finland. In those countries the private sector component is much higher. They have done this by focusing their efforts on particular sectors such as cellular telephones. I referred to our brief that mentions that the availability of angel and venture capital are key issues.

Ablonczy followed up with a similar question about why we are lagging these leading countries. My response noted that these countries have really focused on knowledge as the key driver of their economies.

Pacetti questioned whether we were asking for government to match angel and venture capital funding. BIOTEC said that the real problem for Biotech is not angel investment for start-ups but rather mid-level investment to get fledgling companies up to the next level of growth. They feel that government can facilitate this by changing the rules around such investment. I agreed with that but pointed out that in order for Canadians to tap EU R&D funding, they had to bring some Canadian money to the table and that increased government funding, to be tapped by a competitive process would help Canadian researchers apply for EU Framework funds.

Ian Rutherford
Art Olson
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