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NEWS

For the record

Independent policy think tank closes doors

October 29, 2009

The Canadian Policy Research Networks, which published scores of reports on health care and conducted the community consultations for the Royal Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada headed by ex-Saskatchewan premier Roy Romanow earlier this decade, will cease operations at the end of the year.

"We are losing a much needed voice. In the landscape of public policy we need think tanks that have a different approach from the perceived conventional wisdom of the day," says Romanow.

For the Royal Commission, the networks did seminal and progressive work conducting public consultations across the country that found that Canadians "clearly viewed health care as a public good, and not a commodity," he adds.

Sharon Manson Singer, president of the 15-year-old networks, says Canada has "lost policy capacity across the country — both independent and at every level of government. We are thin on the ground in terms of our policy capacity compared to other developed nations."

The organization has been in survival mode Sept. 25, 2006, when the federal government cancelled a multi-year \$12-million sustaining grant agreement that it had signed five months earlier.

That cut, combined with the recession and the federal government's "loss of appetite" for independent evidence-based research — the federal share of the network's contract research fell from 40% to 4% within a year — doomed the organization, which has 22 employees and about 15 regular contractors, Manson Singer says. "But more important is the loss of a Canadian voice."

The Canadian Policy Research Networks was founded in 1994 by Judith Maxwell, the former head of the Economic Council of Canada, a federally-funded crown corporation which was dissolved by the government in 1993.

The demise of the nonprofit organization represents the loss of another arm's length policy voice, says Bruce Campbell, executive director of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, now the only remaining "national multi-issue" nonprofit policy organization. Campbell says the centre is not dependent on government funding, but rather has core funding from its 11 000 members, made up of individuals, nongovernmental organizations and unions.

The death of Canadian Policy Research Networks and other similar independent organizations degrades the policy dialogue process, Campbell adds. "You're left with corporate-funded think tanks," and as a consequence, democracy is undermined.

The Canadian Policy Research Networks joins the Law Commission of Canada, and the Canadian Labour and Business Council as organizations that have since ceased to exist after they and others had their funding cut in 2006.

Ironically, the networks' website highlights a commentary, Canadian Non-Profit Organizations Play a Critical Role in Social Innovation and Economy, which states that nonprofit and charitable organizations "work hard to make our communities a better place by providing quality research, policy advice ... on everything from health care to housing, to education, the environment and the economy."