

# The Donner Canadian Foundation:

Stimulating Canadian public policy debate

## **Promoting public debate on new policy ideas**

Private philanthropy does more than support public charities in delivering services and opportunities for Canadians. Some far-sighted private foundations have also wanted to improve the quality and quantity of public policy research and debate on new policy perspectives and ideas. The Donner Canadian Foundation is a leading example, with its prescient investment in the creation of three regional public policy think-tanks beginning in the mid-90s. The Donner investment helped stimulate a new depth of engagement around market approaches, government responsibilities and individual opportunity. The work of these three centres – the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies, the Montreal Economic Institute and the Frontier Centre for Public Policy in Winnipeg – has added considerably to the breadth of Canadian public policy debate since the mid-90s.

## **A philanthropic case study: the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies**

Since the 1960s, the Donner Canadian Foundation, a decades-old family philanthropy, had funded occasional policy research initiatives among its numerous traditional “bricks-and-mortar” grants for health care and education facilities. Foundation board members were familiar with the rich think-tank environment in the United States and the paucity of independent centres specifical-



Broadening opportunities for Canadians

ly dedicated to stimulating policy ideas in Canada. Beginning in 1994 with a three-year grant of \$450,000 to the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies (AIMS) in Halifax, the Foundation began responding to this lack of non-partisan institutions of policy development. (The Frontier Centre in Winnipeg and the Montreal Institute received similar funding beginning in 1997.) The Donner Foundation continued to provide funds for nearly a decade -- now exceeding a total \$1.4 million for the Atlantic Institute alone.

Since its inception and the receipt of Donner funding, AIMS has become an internationally recognized source of ideas, viewpoints and analysis about the emerging economic and public policy issues facing Atlantic Canadians and all Canadians. Research by staff and contracted

experts has focused on policy options in healthcare, education, unemployment insurance, equalization, local governance, local economies and resource sectors, and regional trade. The institute disseminates its findings through conferences, publications, consultancies and other outreach aimed at decision-makers, interest groups and the general public. The excellence of its public policy work has been recognized on four occasions by the international think tank community through awards from the Atlas Economic Research Foundation.

The AIMS think-tank website cites many national and international accolades and achievements. But CEO Brian Lee Crowley acknowledges that quantifying the value of think-tanks is

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still more difficult than measuring the outcomes of donors' capital project support. "The value of ideas is not so immediately self-evident, especially to business people [potential donors] used to a balance-sheet approach to value," says Crowley. In the case of AIMS, however, Crowley - an economist and former CEO of the Atlantic Provinces Economic Council -- cites policy initiatives where he says his institute's input is clear, and has effectively influenced behaviour.

With Donner funding AIMS created a school performance measuring tool which could be applied to all Atlantic Canada secondary education. In the four years since Newfoundland adopted the tool, says Crowley, the province has risen four places on the national scale of provincial education outcomes. Donner funding also enabled AIMS to fo-

cus intensely for several years on the issue of equalization (federal-provincial financial transfers) and its reconsideration. Some provincial governments now echo AIMS viewpoints on the need for change, and premiers arm themselves with specific analyses and proposals mined from the work of AIMS. "AIMS probably is the single most influential voice in making this whole debate happen," says Crowley.

The Donner start-up grants to AIMS and other think-tanks reflected a desire to stimulate policy debate in Canada, with the calculation that public policy changes have the potential to do more public good at lower cost than investing in individual project grants. And the Foundation considers its specific investments in Canadian think-tanks to have been very successful, says Helen McLean, executive director of the Donner Canadian Foundation in Toronto. The Foundation has

not done a formal evaluation of its entrepreneurial approach to funding policy debate "but there is a feeling that there is a much stronger discourse in public policy today," says McLean.

The foundation's willingness to fund the Winnipeg-based Frontier Centre for Public Policy is an example of perceptive risk-taking at a time when government-funded think-tanks "appeared to be very much creatures of their funders," says the Frontier Centre's president Peter Holle. "There was comparatively little out-of-the-box thinking" around economic and social policy, especially in Manitoba and Saskatchewan in the mid 1990s, says Holle. "In Manitoba there is a culture of intense government engagement. We're definitely intellectual missionaries here.... Donner people identified the dearth of new perspectives" and "took a pretty big gamble on us, for which we're grateful."