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### **The Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies: Opening the Dialogue**

I start by acknowledging that we are on land taken from its original indigenous Musqueam inhabitants. Also that this is a public university supported by the peoples of British Columbia. We therefore have responsibilities as an institution of higher education and research, and we should better justify what we do on this land with that money.

Though today's dialogue is part of the search for an interim director for the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies, what I hope we can embark on, and continue tomorrow and Friday, is an open reflection on the role of the Institute, on its relationship to the university, and also on the responsibilities of the university to the world beyond.

These relationships are homologous. *The dynamic between Institute and University can provide a model for the dynamic between the university and society as a whole. Neither relationship is easy. Indeed, they should be marked by a productive tension, with the Institute reminding the university of its better nature, just as the university offers society ways of thinking that are not reducible to calculation or profit.*

I therefore thank Santa Ono and the Institute Board for today's event. As an outsider candidate, I may not become Interim Director, though I have much to offer. But I will be happy if I help to generate debate about the Institute and the university.

The Institute means a lot to me. My own research and understanding of scholarship have been shaped by interdisciplinary projects and centers across three continents. This impact has been direct, with for instance Milwaukee's Center for Twentieth-Century Studies or Duke's John Hope Franklin Center where I did my graduate work, or Manchester's Centre for Latin American Cultural Studies that I helped to found. It has also been indirect, as my work engages with for example Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. This background explains why at UBC I have been drawn to projects such as Arts One and above all the Peter Wall Institute, an intellectual oasis that has felt like my home on campus.

So I was shocked to hear, in November, of Philippe Tortell's resignation as Director, and alarmed to read his warning of "an existential threat to the Institute's core mission, academic independence and capacity to catalyze truly innovative and creative research." But we should not have been surprised. The Institute's most recent external review tells us that this is a crisis long foretold. Even back in 2011, the review concluded that there was an opportunity to be grasped but also dangers to be avoided:

*PWIAS may well be unique in the world among institutes for advanced study in having appreciably more resources than it needs for its present programs. Such a situation naturally attracts predators eager to deploy the resources for their own schemes, producing mission creep of the sort that is perhaps already discernible. [ . . . ] If the moment is not seized, the resources may be dissipated rather than focused, and a glorious opportunity will have been lost.*

If we have indeed seen predators eyeing up the Institute's resources, the blame must be placed not only on central administration, but also on an Institute that has not made good on its "glorious opportunity." In a competitive environment where money, space, and time are scarce, the onus is on the Institute to show leadership, principle, and vision.

Yet the moment has not yet passed. The Institute can still become all it can be, pressing the university to live up to its better self.

Right now, the Wall Institute is seen as a problem. The directorship particularly is a poisoned chalice. No wonder, in that so many have come and gone in so little time: the tenure of an Institute Director is about as long and untroubled as that of an Attorney General under Justin Trudeau. And now we will have an Interim Director, with a new external review amid an atmosphere of uncertainty and foreboding.

But the controversy around the Institute is a symptom of larger issues affecting the university as a whole, and the Institute offers a vantage point from which to address them. The Institute is less problem than solution. Or rather, part of its mission must be to keep causing problems, to trouble a university sometimes tempted to short-cuts or complacency, just as the university itself should be an unsettling force in society at large.

*If there is a problem with the Institute, it is that it is not causing enough problems, not raising enough fuss. It is that, again in the words of its external reviewers, it has too often been "exceptionally inward looking and its programs [ . . . ] lack sufficient coherence, synergy and external impact."*

The Interim Director will have to prepare for and manage the Institute's upcoming external review. We cannot second-guess that review's conclusions. But *we can build on the previous review's conclusions*, to articulate basic principles, which apply as much to the university as to the Institute, and we can start a discussion to feed into the process.

*The last review stressed impact, synergy, coherence, and internationalism; I will add openness.*

1. *Impact. The Institute should make an impact by proposing directions for academic research. It should take a lead and give substance to its programming.* At present, in providing grants on any topic, across the university, it tends to follow rather than to lead, hoping for serendipity rather than planning with a purpose. Much good work is funded by the Institute, but no wonder administrators think its funds could be aligned with clusters and the university's strategic plan. *With the help of a reconstituted Advisory Board, the Institute should take the initiative, stepping up to make a difference by advancing concepts and suggesting priorities for interdisciplinary study, freed of the constraints faced by clusters and other units.*

2. *Synergy. The Institute should achieve synergy by ensuring that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Its programs should be more clearly articulated with each other.* At present, the connections between (say) the Wall Scholars and the Research Roundtables or the Associates' dinner talks tend to be accidental rather than considered. But in a given year, or as part of a multi-year track, they could contribute to a common program. *There would still be room for contingency, but in the context of a focussed agenda designed for impact and coherence. The Institute should also have postdoctoral positions and a role for graduate students, to enhance its networks and to offer training in advanced study.*

3. *Coherence. The Institute should ensure coherence by promoting projects that directly address disciplinary boundaries. It should acknowledge the difficulty of interdisciplinary collaboration.* At present, with the laudable intention of inclusivity, it tends to assume that interdisciplinarity is merely a matter of getting the right people in a room together. But this leads to superficial exchanges at worst, and discussions of administrative or institutional issues at best, rather than real conceptual production. *Reflection on and critique of academic and institutional life is important, but it is only one part of the Institute's remit. The Institute should be a place where advanced study actually happens.*

4. *Internationalism. The Institute is rooted in its local context, and should make the most of its location, but it also needs to be international in scope. Like the university, at present it is often global in aspiration but parochial in practice.* Its international visiting research scholars and roundtables, as well as colloquia abroad, enable the mobilization of scholarship, but for brief periods and without much integration with other programs. *Wall scholarships need to be opened up to international competition.* A program of postdoctoral fellowships, plus the incorporation of graduate students, will ensure the Institute's impact by helping to form generations of scholars who will draw on their experience at the Institute as they take up positions around the world.

5. *Openness. The Institute needs to be open and outward-looking in every way.* It has been described as a "taste of first class" within the university, just as the university itself is often seen as a privileged "ivory tower," but it must shed that aura of exclusivity. Its relationship with the communities in which it is embedded should be marked by collaboration, rather than either defensiveness or one-way, top-down knowledge transmission, even as it defends its autonomy and insists that the logic of enquiry is distinct from the logics of policy or capital accumulation. *It should draw on and contribute to the many external resources for conceptualizing common problems, rather than purporting to offer finished solutions. It should have critique as well as self-critique at its heart.*

One might add other principles. I could say more about critique, or add that the Institute and the university should also, for instance, be democratic, autonomous, diverse, and conservative. But these five are surely a good start.

In conclusion, the challenges facing the Peter Wall Institute, like those facing UBC, are steep. The two cannot be at loggerheads. The Institute is the product of a pioneering if sometimes delicate partnership between the university and the private sector, in the name of principles of advanced study that go beyond either. *Stressing impact, synergy, and coherence, internationalism and openness, we need to rethink the interconnections of Institute, University, and society as a whole. We need to work on concepts with which to raise problems that unsettle our understandings of the world in which we live.*

Now I look forward to hearing from you, and from the other two nominees.

For more of what I have written on the responsibilities of the university, see <https://posthegemony.org/category/academia>. This includes the following entries:

*"UBC and the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies"*

*"Universities at War"*

*"Escape and the University"*

*"Wikipedia and Higher Education"*

*"From Here"*

*"From Here: MOOCs and Higher Education"*

*"Warwick University Ltd"*

*"MOOCs and the Humanities"*

*"Coursera Condescension"*

*"Eric Mazur and the Suppression of a Utopian Past"*

*"From Discipline and Discovery to Place & Promise"*

*"About Academia"*

*"MOOC"*

*"open"*

*"limited"*

*"excellence"*

*"useless"*