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Letting research down

Technology and innovation are rightly described as "critical elements in today's economic equation" in External Affairs Minister Joe Clark's foreign policy discussion paper, which then explains how Canada is falling behind in the research and development from which technological innovations spring.

Having rung the tocsin, the government of Canada now seems prepared to watch complacently while this serious state of affairs becomes worse.

Reminded of Brian Mulroney's March 14, 1984 campaign promise that a Tory government would "double the collective Canadian contribution to this indispensable sector during our first term in office," Science Minister Tom Siddon told the House of Commons miscellaneous estimates committee that he could not remember the exact wording of this precise promise, which he called more of a general goal than a promise.

The result is that the inadequate 1.3 per cent of Gross National Product now spent by Canada on research and development will not change significantly. Specifically, says Mr. Siddon, "we can't promise that by 1990 that we will be at 2.5 per cent of GNP."

Getting to 2.5 per cent would mean spending by 1990 about \$10 billion, of which \$2 billion would be spent by the federal government. This is a large sum in Canadian terms but small in terms of what is being spent in the fiercely competitive world technological arena.

The foreign policy green paper explains how bad things are just now: "The percentage of our gross domestic product devoted to research and development has recovered to about the same level as it was in 1971, while those of most other major industrialized countries

have moved upward significantly. As a proportion of our domestic product, we spend about half of what the United States, West Germany, Japan and the United Kingdom do on research. We rank still further down the list of Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development countries when our performance in research and development done by industry is compared to that of others. Our record on patent registrations at home and abroad accords with these observations. Relative to other industrialized countries, we have fewer research-intensive industries and we spend less on research."

The long range implications for Canada are obvious. Yet, even as the problem is being explained so graphically by one government department, another, that could do something about it, is suggesting that the general election victory has eliminated the need for this problem to be high on the government's priority list.

Here is the kind of issue on which MPs could have a significant effect through the foreign policy review that has been begun by the green paper. If they believe that Canada should have the kind of vigorous and effective program of private and public research and development that seemed vital to Mr. Mulroney while seeking office, then they can say so within the context of the review. They can ask experts across this country to tell them if Canada will be served better or worse by allowing research and development to continue to have the low priority that it was assigned by the former Liberal government. They can tell Mr. Mulroney and Mr. Siddon that they should seek another way to curtail spending, one that is less damaging to this country's future national economic interests.