

NEW COMMUNICATIONS NORTH AMERICAN LEADERS SUMMIT

North America as Obama's 'innovation hub': some ideas on how to get there

U.S. President Barack Obama asserted that North America is 'a global hub of innovation.' Now we have to make that happen.



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OTTAWA—There was so much excitement with the Three Amigos' Summit—picturesque alpha-male metrosexuals, man hugs, a jog together, toasts to each other, a town hall with students, and speeches in Parliament—it really was a veritable three-way bromance. It was also such a contrast to the other news in the world: Brexit, Nigel Farage, Donald Trump, and the Istanbul airport bombing.

The celebrity nature of the summit of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, U.S. President Barack Obama, and Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto almost overshadowed the substance of their meetings. It was short in time, but long on content. The leaders did announce a plethora of forward-looking agreements that their ministers and officials had been working on for months.

At the summit's closing press conference, Obama asserted that North America is "a global hub of innovation," which was the theme of a forum on Advancing Innovation and Science across North America held in Ottawa the day before the North American Leaders' Summit.

Natural Resources Minister Jim Carr was the Canadian keynote speaker who launched the forum, highlighting the role that he and the Trudeau government were taking to advance collaboration. Within weeks of becoming minister, he had hosted his Mexican and American counterparts in Winnipeg. "The agenda of the world is remarkably similar for energy and innovation and we have willing partners in the U.S. and Mexico. We have established trusting relationships."

And here is the interesting thing about innovation: innovators and scientists don't care about borders. They just want to do their thing. The presence of borders and different regulations from country to country act as barriers to progress. They really want that hub to be like a single hub.

The forum organized by the Pearson Centre, co-hosted with the University of Ottawa, brought together government, industry, labour, think tank and scientific leaders from the three countries for a timely discussion on making that innovation hub a reality.

Enrique Cabrero Mendoza, head of Mexico's National Council for Science and Technology, and a member of the Mexican president's delegation, noted that the challenges he saw were to encourage business to do more in research and innovation, to create stronger linkages between academic institutions and industry, and to create better linkages across borders.

American keynote speaker, Peter Arzberger of the National Science Foundation in Washington, said the U.S. built the case for partnership in innovation



To turn the collaborative message of Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, and U.S. President Barack Obama into reality, cross-border cooperation, regulation, freer movements of people and research and tri-national funding arrangements are going to be key, pictured June 29 at the North America Leaders Summit in Ottawa. *The Hill Times* photographs by Jake Wright

by pushing the importance of collaboration and a multidisciplinary approach. "Collaboration is growing. Scientists want to work with the best institutions and researchers which cuts across borders. All activities are now multidisciplinary and require partners," said Arzberger.

Eme Onuoha, a vice-president of Xerox Corporation, said his company launched the first open innovation process in 1996-97 with the Institute of Nanotechnology in Canada. (Open innovation is where you get the right people working together regardless of who they work for or where they are.) He noted that organizations expert Henry Chesborough preaches that not all the smart people in the world work for you, but you need to find them and work with them.

But as Cindy Bell, executive vice-president at Genome Canada, noted,

scientists can no longer just travel across the border with their equipment or samples. That makes cross-border innovation challenging at best.

Fortunately, the amigos are hearing the message. In a statement, Trudeau and Peña pledged to "foster cooperation on science, technology, and innovation and further partnerships between Canadian and Mexican academic institutions on low-emission energy solutions."

And when Obama joined in, he forcefully declared that the three countries together were a global innovation hub.

So that's all very progressive, but how do you make it happen?

Elizabeth McDonald of the Canadian Energy Efficiency Alliance pointed out that regulations in countries are behind the rate of innovation and invention.

Further, where there are regulations, they

differ from country to country. So we need more coordination across borders to keep abreast of technology.

A North American energy grid makes sense today said Sergio Marchi, now CEO of the Canadian Electricity Association, pointing to COP 21 as a game changer. He reminded governments that if North American energy and environment agreements are to be successful, there needs to be effective and ongoing consultation between government and industry, across the three countries.

Brad Ashton, a U.S. expert in innovation and technical intelligence, talked of the growth of open innovation in major companies around the world. Interestingly this is also driving the investments of the Canada Foundation for Innovation, whose president, Gilles Patry, talked about open access to both data and facilities that they fund, as a requirement for their investments. Ashton also emphasized that the three countries share a common set of innovation priorities including climate change, alternative energy and cybersecurity, which interestingly were reflected the Leaders' agreements the next day.

Union leader Larry Cann of UA Canada reminds us that we need to maintain an eye on workers and jobs. As technology wipes out jobs, we need to find ways for those laid off to find work.

Others talked about improving the training and education of people from all three countries and standardizing required levels of competencies—young people as well as older displaced workers.

Will Marshall, president of the Washington-based Progressive Policy Institute, suggested that the core problem in the U.S. and in North America is economic stagnation and how hard it is to sustain innovation in the face of small economic growth. Rather, innovation can be the key to growth—he highlighted how the Apple iPhone had created 1.6 million jobs in the U.S. alone. We need to unleash innovation and the economy with big structural changes, big infrastructure, tax reform and training reform. We need to create a regulatory environment that is pro innovation.

Liberal MP Pam Goldsmith-Jones, Foreign Affairs parliamentary secretary, said ministerial mandate letters from the prime minister reminded ministers that a collaborative North American relationship is key.

Speakers suggested that the Innovation Agenda review by Innovation Science and Economic Development Minister Navdeep Bains needs to address the efficient movement between the three countries of people, research and scientific materials relevant to innovation. Cindy Bell suggested we need funding programs that support projects that work across borders. Think-tank leader Gabriel Pulido-Cejudo called for a joint clean energy fund among the three countries.

In short, to turn the collaborative message of Trudeau, Peña, and Obama into reality, cross-border cooperation, regulation, freer movements of people and research and tri-national funding arrangements are going to be key.

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