

Let Science Speak



Harper government continues to muzzle federally funded scientists

AS AN OTTAWA-BASED journalist, I see a lot of protests on Parliament Hill. But none like the one in July 2012.

Oh, it had the usual trappings of a protest—placards and passionate speeches, even some theatrics with the entrance of a coffin draped in black, accompanied by a scythe-wielding Grim Reaper.

But what was extraordinary about that demonstration was that the estimated 2,000 protesters were scientists. That’s right, scientists—from government and academia—dressed in white lab coats and assembled in mock mourning for the “death of evidence” under the Harper government.

It takes a lot to make scientists—a group used to being unappreciated—angry in public. Two things have fuelled their indignation: severe and targeted cutbacks on government research programs and new rules limiting the ability of government scientists to talk to journalists.

On the first front, government scientists have witnessed a long and growing list of cuts to evidence-gathering programs by the Harper administration:

- Omnibus budget bills impose cuts and layoffs that affect the monitoring of waterways, fisheries and natural resource projects.
- The government instructs Statistics Canada to terminate its mandatory long-form census.
- The Department of Fisheries and

Oceans (DFO) stops funding the Experimental Lakes Area, the only facility of its kind in the world, credited with making groundbreaking discoveries about phosphates and acid rain.

■ After producing more than \$100 million worth of groundbreaking climate change research, the Harper government ends support for the Canadian Foundation for Climate and Atmospheric Sciences. Casualties include the Polar Environment Atmospheric Research Laboratory (PEARL) and the Polar Environment Climate Stability Network (PECSN), both critical to studying climate change in the Arctic.

■ Ottawa cuts all funding for the First Nations Statistical Institute (FNSI), which gathers information on Aboriginal peoples, who are usually less represented in government data.

■ Cutbacks to Canada’s ozone monitoring network limit the world’s ability to monitor air quality and ozone depletion.

■ The government shuts down sources of scientific policy advice such as the National Science Advisor (the first and last person in the position was Dr. Arthur Carty, known for his strong stance on “open access” to scientific information) and the National Round Table on Environment and Economy (accused by Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird of pushing for a carbon tax).

There’s an obvious pattern here: the Harper government appears intent on suppressing *certain kinds* of science:

science that could undermine its policies about climate change, the oil sands, ozone depletion, mining and pipeline projects, and other sensitive issues. We are witnessing the erosion of the principle that evidence should be the foundation of political discourse, sound policy and government regulation. Or, as the protesting scientists have put it, Ottawa is becoming “an evidence-free zone” with a governing party dedicated to “decision-based evidence making.”

The protestors’ second grievance was the degree to which they have been muzzled by a government obsessed with message control. Beginning in 2007, the Harper administration brought in new communications guidelines. Scientists were required to submit media interview requests to the Privy Council in Ottawa and then wait, sometimes for weeks, before being told they would not be given approval to speak.

As stories about the restrictions grew, Environment Minister Peter Kent was adamant. “We are not muzzling scientists,” he insisted. The problem resided with “a small number of journalists ... who believe that the universe rotates around them and their deadlines.”

However, documents released in late 2012 under Access to Information revealed the heavy hand of Kent’s office and that of the Privy Council. Both directly intervened to prevent Environment Canada scientist David Tarasick from talking to the media about his discovery of an unprecedented ozone hole over the Canadian Arctic. It had nothing to do with the impatience of self-centred reporters. Tarasick was eventually allowed to speak, but only several

