

Green Scene: Our Silenced Scientists

by Elaine Golds

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Just as the Senate scandal hit the news in late October last year, the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada (PIPSC) released a damning report called *The Big Chill* (available at www.pipsc.ca). This survey of federal scientists describes how they feel the government is muzzling them and, what's worse, putting pressure on some of them to withhold evidence or change information to make it conform to government policy. Because of the attention-grabbing news of the Senate scandal, this profoundly disturbing report has received only scant attention from the public.

I must admit that as a professional research scientist, I find it totally abhorrent that our elected officials are apparently trying to bury scientific data that conflicts with their personal biases. As taxpayers, we support scientific research in Canada because it is supposed to be a knowledge-based venture that leads to the development of intelligent and effective policies. The acquisition of knowledge, whether it is related to learning how ecosystems function or what causes disease, should lead to better-informed decision-making that creates a healthier environment for all Canadians. The research undertaken by government scientists helps to ensure the safety of our food, as well as the safety of the toys our children play with. It should also lead to the creation of policies that will protect the quality of the air we breathe, the water we drink and all other facets of the environment.

There was a time when federal scientists who had their research published in highly-respected scientific journals were trusted to be able to speak directly to the press about the significance of their work. Since the Harper government was first elected in 2006, this policy has been turned upside down with renowned scientists now routinely refused permission to talk to reporters. Federal scientists must now apply for pre-approval from government media relations staff and are often accompanied by them once interviews are allowed to ensure that they don't speak off-message.

Based on the survey conducted last June by PIPSC, 90% of the scientists who responded said they do not feel they can speak freely to the media about the work they do. Nearly as many (86%) said that when faced with a departmental action that could harm public health, safety or the environment, they did not believe they could share their concerns with the public without retaliation from their department. One respondent said, "The current government is re-creating federal departments to serve the interests of its industry and business supporters and is subverting science."

Nearly half (48%) of the scientists who participated were aware of instances in which their departments had suppressed information which lead to incomplete, inaccurate or misleading impressions by the public or media. Almost a quarter (24%) of these scientists reported being directly asked to exclude or alter information for non-scientific reasons. Of the federal scientists interviewed,

71% believe Canada's ability to develop policy, law and programs based on scientific evidence has been now compromised by political interference.

One scientist who participated said, "It is my perception that many decisions we made are heavily influenced by industry lobbying, especially in the area of certain health products. This has changed the way these products are regulated and authorized for sale in Canada, to the possible detriment of consumers". The survey also found that 63% of Environment Canada scientists and 62% of Department of Fisheries and Oceans scientists do not feel their departments incorporate the best climate change science into their policies.

New rules at the Department of Fisheries and Oceans now allow government managers to forbid the publication of research even after it has been accepted by a scientific journal. A new group, Evidence for Democracy, has launched a website (www.scienceuncensored.ca) where people can sign a letter asking for a more transparent and open process for science in Canada.

This biased approach of the federal government to science along with the passing of legislation in 2012 to severely limit protection of fish habitat and the environment, their de-funding of research and closure of world-renowned government research institutes plus more recent actions to close libraries and destroy priceless collections of original research, has set Canada on downward spiral away from a position based on a respect for and a reliance on knowledge. It's no wonder that Canada was recently ranked dead last for environmental protection by a Washington-based group that ranked the twenty seven wealthiest nations in the world on their commitment to development. I have to wonder how it is possible, in only a few years' time, that our nation has sunk so low and why it is that hardly anyone seems to be aware of this demoralizing and dangerous state?