THE BIG CHILL

Silencing Public Interest Science, A Survey



The Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada

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Introduction

Over the past few years, news reports that several federal scientists were prevented from speaking to the media have gained public attention, including those of Scott Dalimore[1] at Natural Resources Canada, Kristi Miller[2] at the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO), and David Tarasick[3] at Environment Canada. While these and similar cases[4] have been widely reported, and while Information Commissioner Suzanne Legault is conducting her own investigation, until recently no survey of federal government scientists has been undertaken to gauge the actual scale of so-called muzzling and political interference or their impacts on public policy, health, safety and the environment. This is vital to know, given the extraordinary importance of federal government science conducted every day to ensure the safety of the food we eat, the drugs and other health products we consume, the air we breathe, the water we drink, the toys our children play with, the health of other species, and the general state of the natural environment and scientific innovation on which Canadians and the economy depend.

Earlier this year, the Professional Institute of the Public Service in Canada (PIPSC), the largest union representing scientists and other professionals in Canada, commissioned Environics Research Group to examine these and other issues of concern to federal scientists and the Canadian public. PIPSC represents scientists in 40 federal departments and agencies. It therefore has unique access to many of those who ensure the health and safety of Canadians, the protection of our environment and the vitality of our economy. Between June 5 and 19, 2013, invitations to participate in an online survey were sent to 15,398 of these members, of which 4,069 participated. The results of the survey are considered accurate + or - 1.6%, 19 times out of 20. (The margin of error is slightly larger for questions asked only of sub-samples.)



90% of federal scientists cannot **speak freely**

Climate Chill

According to the survey, nine out of 10 federal scientists (90%) do not feel that they can speak freely to the media about the work they do. While this statistic alone is worrisome, the survey reveals a further, more troubling finding. Faced with a departmental decision or action that could harm public health, safety or the environment, nearly as many (86%) do not believe they could share their concerns with the public or media without censure or retaliation from their department. As one respondent commented: "The current government is re-creating federal departments to serve the interests of its industry and business supporters and subverting the science….Public servants with a conscience live in fear [of opening] their mouths to the media or the public …."

"The facts are that even expressing mild concern with a chosen plan of action can lead to a harsh reaction."

As another pointedly remarked, "Senior management expects public servants to embrace the fiction that we are here to fearlessly provide good advice to decision-makers. The facts are that even expressing mild concern with a chosen plan of action can lead to a harsh reaction."

In short, a chill has fallen on federal government science and scientists, among whom Dalimore, Tarasick, Miller and others may be seen as only the tip of the iceberg.

1 Scott Dalimore, a geoscientist at Natural Resources Canada, was prevented from doing media interviews about his research on a 13,000-year-old flood published in *Nature* in April 2010.
2 Kristi Miller, a scientist at the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, was prevented from publicly discussing work she published in *Science* on salmon.
3 David Tarasick, an environmental scientist at Environment Canada, was prevented from speaking publicly about his research on the ozone layer that was published in *Nature*.
4 The issue gained further attention in April 2012, when scientists attending the International Polar Year conference in Montreal were shadowed by media relations officers.

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Political Interference

One clear reason for scientists feeling frozen out of their established roles is political interference. The effects are dramatic and should be a concern to all Canadians.

Significantly, half of federal scientists (50%) report being aware of actual cases in which the health and safety of Canadians or environmental sustainability has been compromised because of political interference with their scientific work. Nearly half (48%) are aware of actual cases in which their department or agency suppressed information, leading to incomplete, inaccurate, or misleading impressions by the public, regulated industry, the media and/or government officials.

As one respondent commented, "Often there is pressure to make decisions based on pressure from industry rather than science-based/health issues." Another remarked: "I understand we need to consider all sides of the story and the impacts of our regulatory actions on industry, but science seems no longer to have a strong place in decision making."

Health and **safety** has been **compromised**

50%



A third stated: "I feel that climate change scientists and oil sands scientists are the most muzzled groups, restricted by the current government in what information they can share. And if the current government does not like the results of their research, the solution is to reduce staffing."

Muzzling

In November 2007 Environment Canada implemented a media relations policy requiring that all media interviews with scientists be coordinated by communications staff. Scientists and researchers who once responded freely to media requests must now seek pre-approval from government media relations departments and are often accompanied in interviews by media relations staff.

Asked to **exclude or alter info** for non-scientific reasons

24%

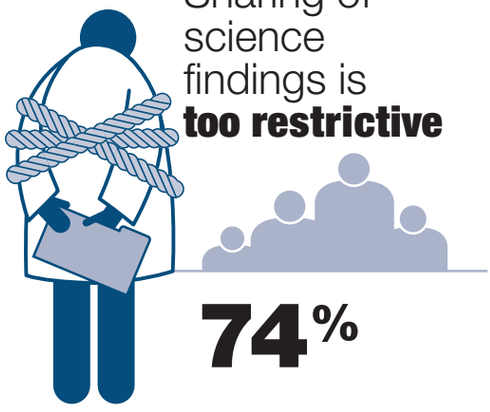


The model has been replicated in several departments, with the result that the media no longer have timely, direct access to government scientists, and scientists no longer have unfettered access to report their findings directly to the public.

"I understand we need to consider all sides of the story and the impacts of our regulatory actions on industry, but science seems no longer to have a strong place in decision making."

Over one-third of the scientists surveyed (37%) report that they were prevented from responding to questions from the public and media by public relations staff or management over the past five years. Significantly, nearly one-quarter (24%) report being directly asked to exclude or alter information for non-scientific reasons.

Not surprisingly, seven out of 10 federal scientists (74%) believe that the sharing of government science findings with the public has become too restricted over the past five years.

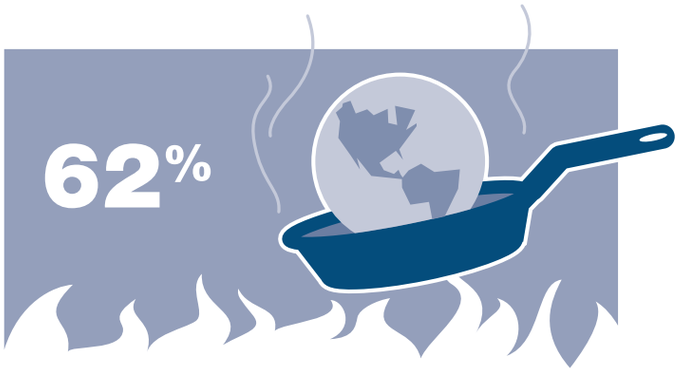


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As one respondent wrote, "Media policy is slow, involves 'minders' to listen to interviews supposedly to keep the scientist from being taken out of context …. This was implemented when the Harper govt. was elected (at that time a minority govt) and I had never seen or heard of such policy in all my [20] years with govt. I also was unaware of any EC scientist that had been taken out of context or misquoted by media, so I don't believe that is a reason to have 'minders' on media interviews.… Now, managers decide … the appropriate contact for the specific topic; the process of waiting for approval is slow (days), and onerous (lots of email, phone calls)…."

In the words of another, "Imagine a scenario something like a subsea earthquake event off the coast of Canada with a potential tidal wave associated with it. Media often contact a scientist directly. They are not allowed to respond directly. They need to first contact media relations for permission …. in practice, what it does is delay information to the media. The media … then simply phone another 'non-government' source …. likely not the best sources of accurate information.… This is discouraging for scientists with the data at their hands, the expertise to discuss it, and yet they can't communicate it in a timely manner."

A third respondent remarked: "Currently, we are being told off the record (because an email would be subject to an [access-to-information] request) that we have to refer enquiries about the new 30-year climate normals (1980-2010) that have been delayed to the media relations line."



Best **climate change science not used** in policy

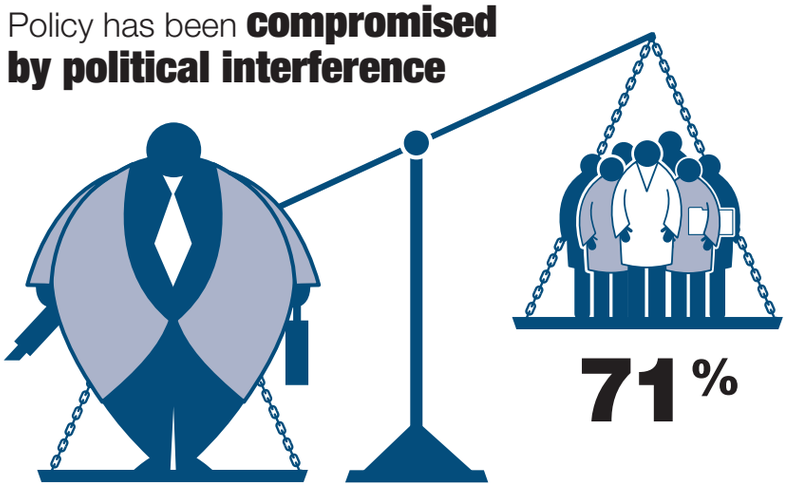
The Impacts on Policy

The impacts of muzzling and political interference on public policy are unquestionably negative.

Seven out of 10 federal scientists (71%) believe Canada's ability to develop policy, law and programs based on scientific evidence has been compromised by political interference. In particular, 63% of Environment Canada scientists and 62% of DFO scientists do not feel their departments incorporate the best climate change science into their policies. Eight out of 10 scientists in these departments (86%) believe the public would be better served if transparency and accountability were increased.

One respondent stated: "It is obvious to me. The recent changes to the Fisheries Act were done to facilitate economic growth for the big companies and not to protect the environment."

Policy has been **compromised by political interference**

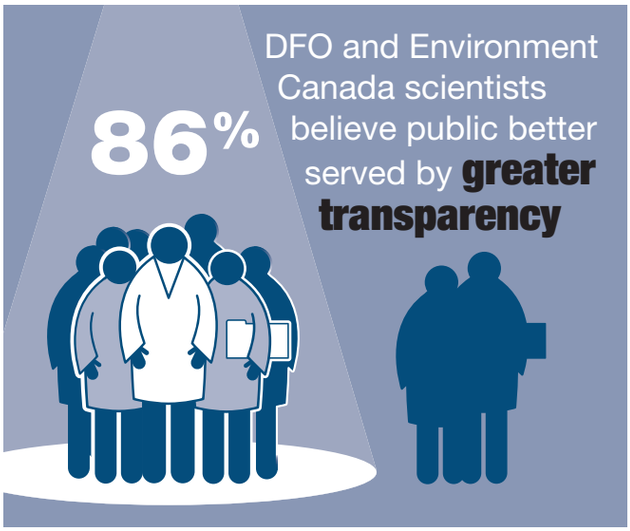


"Currently, we are being told off the record (because an email would be subject to an [access-to-information] request) that we have to refer enquiries about the new 30-year climate normals (1980-2010) that have been delayed to media relations."

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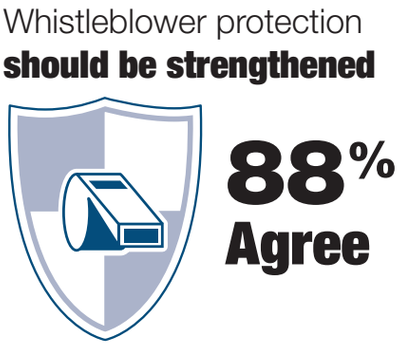
Another remarked: "Environmental regulations and standards have been degraded to make it easier for corporations to do what they want quickly and cheaply with little regulation." A third respondent said: "It is my perception that many decisions we make are heavily influenced by industry lobbying, especially 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."

A fourth concluded bluntly, "The current federal government has gutted environmental legislation and is muzzling federal public scientists, which has the potential to put the health and safety of Canadians and the environment at risk. I am extremely concerned about the approach of the current government towards science and transparency. The public service can no longer provide the best service possible for Canadians under the current government."



Conclusion

Muzzling scientists is undemocratic, unprofessional and unnecessary. With few exceptions (e.g., national security), government scientific findings should be shared freely with the media and the public. No one is more qualified to speak about their findings than scientists themselves. Political interference in the dissemination of scientific knowledge and understanding hinders Canada's obligations to both the public and the scientific community.



No scientific reasons have been put forth demonstrating the need for a policy that restricts scientists' access to the media and, equally important, no political argument has been made demonstrating that the public interest is poorly served by such direct access. On the contrary, innumerable access-to-information requests and the historic revelations of whistleblowers demonstrate an abiding value in and need for more open government and evidence-based policy and research – especially in the areas of health, safety, and the environment.

Federal scientists believe strongly in open government, but they are not unreasonable in their expectations. While virtually all (98%) believe science findings should be shared with the public, 61% believe they should be shared with some restrictions in some cases (e.g., national security), and only 37% believe they should be shared without restrictions. Just 2% said they should only be shared with the public in special cases.

Most (88%) believe whistleblower protections should be strengthened. Even in a time of austerity, as one respondent remarked, "More protection to whistleblowers should be afforded."

Canada's scientists deal primarily in facts. They are not known for ill-considered opinions or rash judgments. Sound policy, public awareness and the integrity of evidence-based decision-making require that science be heard. So when a clear majority of federal scientists state that they are not permitted to speak freely, that the sharing of scientific findings has become too restricted, that public policy has been compromised by political interference, and that greater protection for whistleblowers is needed, Canadians and government alike should listen.

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Survey Questions and Responses

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I am allowed to speak freely and without constraints to the media about work I do at my Department/Agency.

90% No (10% Yes)

If I knew of a departmental decision or action that, based on my scientific knowledge, could bring harm to the public interest, including to health, safety, or the environment, I could share these concerns with the public or media without fear of censure or retaliation from my Department/Agency.

86% Disagree (4% Strongly agree, 10% Somewhat agree, 28% Somewhat disagree, 59% Strongly disagree)

Political Interference

I am aware of cases where the health and safety of Canadians (or environmental sustainability) has been compromised because of political interference with our scientific work.

50% Agree (14% Strongly agree, 36% Somewhat agree, 19% Somewhat disagree, 30% Strongly Disagree)

I am aware of cases where my department or agency has suppressed or declined to release information, and where this led to incomplete, inaccurate, or misleading impressions by the public, regulated industry, the media and/or government officials.

48% Agree (15% Strongly agree, 33% Somewhat agree, 20% Somewhat disagree, 32% Strongly disagree)

Muzzling

In the past 5 years, I have received a question from the public or media that I have the expertise to answer, but have been prevented from doing so by public relations or by management.

37% Yes (63% No)

How often have you been asked - for non-scientific reasons - to exclude or alter technical information or your conclusions in a federal government document by the following...

- Manager/supervisor, business/industry, politically appointed staff, public interest advocates, **or** other government depts/agencies - **24% Often or Sometimes** (6% Often, 18% Sometimes, 19% Rarely, 32% Never, 25% N/A)[5]

Over the last 5 years, do you feel that the sharing of government science findings with the Canadian public has become too restricted or too unrestricted?[6]

- Too Restricted – **74%**
- Too Unrestricted – **4%**
- No Change – **22%**

5 For manager/supervisor and politically appointed staff alone the figure is 19%.
6 Base: All PIPSC scientists (“Not Applicable” responses excluded from percentages, n=3,358).

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The Impacts on Policy

Our ability to develop policy, law, and programs that are based on scientific evidence and facts has been compromised by political interference.

71% Agree (24% Strongly Agree, 47% Somewhat Agree, 14% Somewhat disagree, 14% Strongly disagree)

Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statement.[7]

Fisheries and Oceans Canada actively incorporates the best climate change science into its policies, resource predictions and management decisions.

62% Disagree (2% Strongly agree, 20% Somewhat agree, 36% Somewhat disagree, 26% Strongly Disagree, 16% N/A)

The public would be better served if Fisheries and Oceans Canada increased its transparency and accountability.

86% Agree (44% Strongly agree, 42% Somewhat agree, 7% Somewhat disagree, 1% Strongly Disagree, 7% N/A)

Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statement.[8]

Environment Canada actively incorporates the best climate change science into its policies, resource predictions and management decisions.

63% Disagree (2% Strongly agree, 19% Somewhat agree, 34% Somewhat disagree, 29% Strongly Disagree, 17% N/A)

The public would be better served if Environment Canada increased its transparency and accountability.

86% Agree (48% Strongly agree, 38% Somewhat agree, 7% Somewhat disagree, 2% Strongly disagree, 6% N/A)

Conclusion

Thinking about the sharing of government science findings with the Canadian public, would you say government science findings should ...[9]

- Always be shared with the public without restriction - **37%**
- Usually be shared with the public, but with some restrictions in certain cases - **61%**
- Only be shared with the public in special cases and otherwise restricted - **2%**

The public would be better served if the federal government strengthened its “whistleblower” protection for public service employees.

88% Agree (45% Strongly agree, 43% Somewhat agree, 8% Somewhat disagree, 4% Strongly Disagree)



7 Base: Fisheries and Oceans Canada scientists (n=343).
8 Base: Environment Canada scientists (n=670).
9 Base: All PIPSC scientists (“Not Applicable” responses excluded from percentages, n=3,358).

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"...The current federal government has gutted environmental legislation and is muzzling federal public scientists, which has the potential to put the health and safety of Canadians and the environment at risk."

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