

Censorship of Canadian Scientists: Where is the outrage?



By Monika Viktorova | January 30, 2014

In October 2013, the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada, the largest union of federally employed scientists and professionals, released a damning report:

- 90% of federal scientists do not feel that they can freely discuss their work in the media.
- 74% believe “the sharing of government science findings with the public has become too restricted over the past five years.”
- 37% report they were prevented from responding to questions from the public and media by public relations staff or management over the past five years.
- 86% felt that they could not share their concerns about potentially harmful departmental decisions concerning public health, safety or the environment with the media without retaliation.
- 24% report being directly asked to exclude or alter information for non-scientific reasons.
- 71% believe Canada’s ability to develop policy, law and programs based on scientific evidence has been compromised by political interference.
- 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.

The report, titled “The Big Chill”, indicates widespread censorship in Canadian scientific discourse that seems to be affecting public policy, at least according to the scientists themselves. More than 4000 of the 15 000 scientists surveyed responded. For the statistically inclined, the margin of error is +/- 1.6%.

So where is the outrage?

In September of 2013, hundreds of scientists and supporters staged a protest on Parliament Hill, reports The Toronto Star. Protesters chanted: “What do we want? Evidence-based decision-making!” The protest, however, remained small and isolated, begging the question: why is the Canadian public ignoring censorship of government scientists, perhaps to its detriment? It may be time for both the larger scientific community and the public to recognize that knowledge creation is anything but apolitical. Mixing science with politics can literally save lives- evidence-based public policy is a crucial underpinning of a government wishing to represent its people to the best of its ability. Anything less is at best willful ignorance and at worst corruption. Jeremy Kerr, a biology professor at the University of Ottawa, stated: “As a commentary on the state of affairs, when people like me start showing up wearing their lab coats having come from their laboratories, things are pretty bleak”.

What is the government’s response? Jeffrey Hutchins, a professor in the Faculty of Science at Dalhousie, told the Toronto Star that upon hearing his testimony about the detriment of scientific censorship, a conservative MP stated: “In my view, scientists should stick to science.” The CBC reports that when asked about the PIPSC survey, the Minister of State for Science and Technology Greg Rickford simply said, “Our government has made record investments in science.”

An interesting response, since the CBC reports the cutting of 2000 federal scientific jobs in the past 5 years and the loss of funding for institutes and labs that monitored smoke stack emissions, food inspections, oil spills, water quality and climate change, among others.

Currently, a google search of “censorship of Canadian scientists” gives more than 12 000 000 hits. While the articles and news stories about the muzzling of scientists in Canada are more than abundant, there has been no discernible public outrage or widespread demonstration of support. Perhaps the apolitical nature of the scientific community is to blame, or perhaps the widespread apathy is a tacit agreement with the current government’s opinion that science and politics shouldn’t mix. Whatever the cause, allowing science-based policy to fall by the wayside is shameful for a country that considers itself an example of well-balanced democracy.

A government that ignores or suppresses instead of embracing evidence-based policy replaces progress with stagnation. Left with limited information, the public is vulnerable to allowing the government to enact policies that may not be in the best interest of Canadians. Democracy does not flourish under a lack of transparency. It’s time to recognize the scientific field as political and demand accountability and an end to scientific censorship.

Original Blog post can be found here: <http://www.sp-exchange.ca/2014/01/30/censorship-of-canadian-scientists-where-is-the-outrage/>

Most Federal Scientists Feel They Can’t Speak Out, Even If Public Health and Safety at Risk, Says New Survey

A major survey of federal government scientists commissioned by the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada (PIPSC) has found that 90% feel they are not allowed to speak freely to the media about the work they do and that, faced with a departmental decision that could harm public health, safety or the environment, nearly as many (86%) would face censure or retaliation for doing so.

The survey, the findings of which are included in a new report titled *The Big Chill*, is the first extensive effort to gauge the scale and impact of “muzzling” and political interference among federal scientists since the Harper government introduced communications policies requiring them to seek approval before being interviewed by journalists. Information Commissioner Suzanne Legault is currently conducting her own investigation of the policies, which have been widely criticized for silencing scientists, suppressing information critical or contradictory of government policy, and delaying timely, vital information to the media and public.

In particular, the survey also found that nearly one-quarter (24%) of respondents had been directly asked to exclude or alter information for non-scientific reasons and that over one-third (37%) had been prevented in the past five years from responding to questions from the public and media. In addition, the survey found that nearly three out of every four federal scientists (74%) believe the sharing of scientific findings has become too restricted in the past five years and that nearly the same number (71%) believe political interference has compromised Canada’s ability to develop policy, law and programs based on scientific evidence. According to the survey, 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, industry and/or other government officials.

“Federal scientists are facing a climate of fear,” says PIPSC president Gary Corbett, “a chill brought on by government policies that serve no one’s interests, least of all those of the Canadian public. The safety of our food, air, water, of hundreds of consumer and industrial products, and our environment depends on the ability of federal scientists to provide complete, unbiased, timely and accurate information to Canadians. Current policies must change to ensure these objectives are met.” “Documenting the problem is the essential first step toward solving it,” added Francesca Grifo, Senior Scientist with the Union of Concerned Scientists in the United States where, under the Bush administration, federal scientists faced many similar problems. “You can’t hope to solve the issues until you fully understand them.”

Invitations to participate in the online survey, hosted by Environics Research, were sent to 15,398 PIPSC members – scientists, researchers and engineers – engaged in scientific work in over 40 federal departments and agencies. Of these, 4,069 (26%) responded between June 5 and 19, 2013. The survey is considered accurate + or – 1.6%, 19 times out of 20.

The full report can be found here: <http://www.pipsc.ca/portal/page/portal/website/issues/science/bigchill>