

Canada's government suppresses scientific reporting

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Amidst charges that the Conservative government has instituted measures to restrict federal government scientists from sharing their findings and opinions with journalists and, hence, the general public, Canada's Information Commissioner, Suzanne Legault, advised this week that her office will investigate.

In February, Democracy Watch and the University of Victoria Law Clinic lodged a complaint with Legault alleging that the government has breached the Access to Information Act by instituting a "policy forcing scientists to jump through hoops before speaking with the media."

The complainants allege that the government systematically manipulates and suppresses the release of scientific information by not allowing federally-employed scientists to speak freely to the media, selecting which media requests can be answered, and crafting scripted responses from the government's communications representatives to be mouthed by scientists during any permitted interviews or presentations. Moreover, on those few occasions when federal scientists are allowed to speak at media events, the government seeks to intimidate them by having them accompanied by communications "watch-dogs" and requiring civil servants to record any public statements that they may make.

Democracy Watch and the University of Victoria Law Clinic provided Legault with a series of alarming examples to buttress their case against the government. Many of the cases cited involved scientists investigating environmental issues associated with global warming, fishery depletion, and radiation proliferation, around which there was increased public concern after the 2011 Fukushima nuclear plant meltdown in Japan. Scientists were ordered to refrain from speaking to the media and requests by the media

for access to scientific experts were routinely refused until long after journalists' deadlines had passed.

The gag order on the country's scientific community coincides with an increasing government assault on science as a whole.

In its 2012-13 and 2013-14 budgets, Stephen Harper's Conservative government outlined a massive program of social spending cuts that will see federal discretionary spending reduced by \$9 billion in the 2013-14 fiscal year and by almost \$60 billion over the next five years. While virtually all programs are impacted, the government has made scientific and environmental research programs a special target.

As a result of the government's new "streamlined" environmental review process, 3,000 scheduled environmental assessments have been cancelled. Research stations in Canada's national parks are closing or have had their funding reduced. Sixty Environment Canada scientists are losing their jobs and one hundred scientists at the Canada Research Council (CRC) are being axed. The cuts at the CRC are part of a government-ordered refocusing of its mandate. Basic research projects are being discouraged and de-funded in favor of commercially applicable research.

World renowned programs, such as the Experimental Lakes Area (ELA) in Ontario are slated to close. Located in the Ontario wilderness, the ELA, which consists of 58 lakes and a laboratory, provides a unique environment for testing the impact of chemicals in a natural environment. It has provided critical data for the study of acid rain and the impact of chemical fertilizers on marine life.

Reduced regulatory oversight provisions in Harper's budgets are also taking their toll. A team of Environment Canada technicians—the only group in the country capable of monitoring cancer causing

smokestack emissions—has been disbanded. In addition, a leading-edge ozone depletion station in the Yukon will soon be closed and a project to monitor and study the impact of oil spills has been cancelled.

Since taking office in 2006, the Harper government, as part of its overall agenda of promoting big business and business profits at the expense of working people, has consistently sought to weaken environmental protection and oversight. Already in 2008 it abolished the post of National Science Advisor.

As part of its push to make Canada an “energy super-power” through rapid expansion of oil production from the Alberta tar sands, Harper and his government have sought to downplay, if not outright dismiss, concerns about climate change.

Canada was the first country to withdraw from the Kyoto Protocol on climate change. More recently, it has curtailed the public inquiry into the Gateway Pipeline project to move tar sands bitumen to the Pacific coast, smeared environmental groups opposed to the development of the tar sands as “radical” and “un-Canadian,” and threatened them with the loss of their charitable tax status.

Last week, Harper’s Foreign Affairs Minister, John Baird, announced that Canada was withdrawing from the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification—a body that seeks to ameliorate the drought conditions associated with the phenomenon of global warming.

Echoing the rhetoric of the American right, Harper long dismissed the research on global warming as “tentative and contradictory” and branded the (failed) attempt to curtail greenhouse gasses under the Kyoto Protocol a “socialist scheme”.

The Harper government’s aversion to scientific reporting extends far beyond opposition to environmental regulation. In 2010 Harper cancelled the long-form reporting requirement during the decennial national census. Information gleaned from the long-form census had long served as a scientific tool for those pressing for the maintenance and expansion of public services.

There is another aspect to the Conservative’s method. The attack on objective science and the free movement of scientific thought in general is part of a wider promotion of ignorance and social reaction.

Harper, an evangelical Christian, and his

Conservatives have not dared to mount a frontal attack on women’s right to abortion, because they know it would be electoral suicide. But they are seeking to promote a socially conservative and religious obscurantist agenda by other means. The Harper government’s assault on science is a centerpiece of that project and dove-tails with changes in funding policies for all manner of government and non-governmental agencies.

Monies provided by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) to religious non-profit organizations increased by 42 percent between 2005 and 2010. Over the same time period, secular NGOs received only a 5 percent increase. And to guarantee a more direct link in future between the government’s predatory foreign policy and CIDA, that organization will soon be subsumed under the Department of Foreign Affairs. Christian universities and colleges have enjoyed a massive influx of government funds over the past several years.

Recently, the Harper government—even as it curtails the democratic rights of striking workers via back-to-work laws, organizes state violence against social and environmental activists (G20), and covers up vote suppression tactics—announced with much fanfare, the creation of a new Office of Religious Freedom with generous funding.

The attack on science, in lock-step with the state promotion of religious obscurantism receives a significant amount of support from within the political and media establishment because the promotion of these ideologies is a principal means by which the ruling elite is seeking to build a base of support for its antidemocratic, militarist and right-wing economic and geo-political agenda. Conversely, the defense of reason and science must be a foundational principle of the working class-led socialist struggle for human liberation.



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