

Canada: Cross-country protests against Conservatives' attack on science

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20 September 2013

Hundreds of scientists gathered on Parliament Hill in Ottawa earlier this week to protest against the federal Conservative government's attack on scientific freedom and its ongoing implementation of steep cuts in funding for scientific research. They were joined in a "Stand Up for Science" mobilization by hundreds of other scientists, researchers and their supporters in sixteen other cities across Canada.

The protesters aired grievances against Stephen Harper's Conservatives in three specific areas of government scientific policy—changes to the mandate of the National Research Council; the muzzling of scientists employed by the federal government; and cuts to, and in many cases the outright closure of, government science-related programs, particularly in the area of environmental protection.

Last May, the government announced that the National Research Council—Canada's foremost public scientific institute—will mothball its decades-old mandate to advance "basic science" and concentrate instead on "business-driven" projects.

Said former businessman and current NRC President John McDougall, "We have shifted the primary focus of our work from the traditional emphasis on basic research and discovery science in favour of a more targeted approach to research and development. Impact is the essence of innovation. A new idea or discovery may in fact be interesting, but it doesn't qualify as innovation until it's been developed into something that has commercial or societal value."

McDougall's remarks were echoed by Science and Technology Minister Gary Goodyear. He said that the NRC needed to transition to "business-driven, industry-relevant research and development." To further affirm the NRC's new role as a vassal to profit-making corporations, Goodyear added, "The NRC will now focus on the identified research needs of Canadian businesses. It

will be customer pull."

This monetization of science is a barely concealed cash subsidy to Canadian corporations to the tune of almost a billion dollars a year. Monies previously earmarked for pure scientific inquiry will now be redirected to industry in the form of grants aimed at addressing particular technical and operational challenges facing corporate Canada.

James Turk, executive director of the Canadian Association of University Teachers, echoed the sentiments of many at this week's "Stand up for Science" rallies. "Science never does well when politicians try to direct it based on ideology," he said. "What this government is doing is basically diverting money that should go to fundamental research to research that industry should be doing itself." David Sean, who attended the Ottawa rally elaborated in an interview with *Metro News*, "When you think about things such as the laser, it was discovered way before we had applications for it. Those sorts of discoveries would not have occurred if we weren't looking at very fundamental things driven by curiosity."

Protesters at the rallies also complained bitterly about government efforts to restrict federal government scientists from sharing their findings and opinions with journalists and, hence, the general public, whenever scientific findings might contradict government policy.

Scientists have charged 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, those federal scientists allowed to speak to the media are shadowed by government officials.

The Conservatives' efforts to muzzle scientists have particularly targeted those involved in work on environmental issues, such as global warming, fishery depletion, and radiation proliferation, about which there has been much increased public concern since the 2011 nuclear plant meltdown in Fukushima, Japan.

While seeking to gag government scientists, the Harper government has also slashed spending on scientific research, as part of a program of massive social spending cuts that will see federal discretionary spending cut by almost \$60 billion over the next five years.

The science funding cuts have targeted environmental research—especially research into climate change, which the government views as a threat to its plans to make Canada an “energy superpower” through the development of the Alberta tar sands. Overall, as a result of the budget cuts, more than 5,300 scientists, researchers and technicians have already lost their jobs and huge blows have been delivered to environmental oversight and scientific research.

World-renowned programs, such as the Experimental Lakes Area (ELA) in Ontario have been targeted. 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. The Harper Government arranged for a September 1 shutdown. The ELA, however, has been thrown a temporary lifeline by the Ontario provincial government, with the program's fate still hanging precariously in the balance.

The Department of Fisheries has already seen three rounds of cuts with three more on the horizon. Entire programs have been discontinued including the Ocean Contaminants Research Program and the Fish Habitat Management Program. The Centre for Offshore Oil, Gas and Energy Research, which is the only agency monitoring oil and gas drilling in coastal waters, has been mothballed.

The prestigious Polar Environment Atmospheric Research Laboratory (PEARL), which is a leading global outpost for monitoring the expanding ozone hole over the North Pole, was initially closed, then re-opened with a one-third cut to its budget. The Canadian Foundation for Climate and Atmospheric Sciences, the country's main research facility on climate change, has also been discontinued. The renowned Cereal Research Center in Winnipeg, which studies plant genetics and soils and

develops new varieties of wheat, will be shuttered next spring as part of a 10 percent cut to Agriculture Canada.

The full list of programs that have had their budgets slashed to the bone is almost endless. Clean water programs, smokestack emission and contaminated sites monitoring, food safety watchdogs, forestry laboratories and pandemic research facilities have all been targeted. Even in the wake of the catastrophic train derailment that incinerated 47 people in Lac Megantic, Quebec last July, plans are going ahead to slash the research budget on the transportation of dangerous goods.

The Harper government's aversion to scientific reporting extends far beyond opposition to environmental regulation. In 2010, Harper cancelled the long-form reporting requirement for 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. Last week, Statistics Canada reported that the information contained in its 2011 voluntary survey was unreliable and should not be compared to previous censuses.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in a previous article when many of Harper's cuts were revealed last spring, “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. ... This attack, 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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