

DEATH OF EVIDENCE BACKGROUNDER

THE PROBLEM

For Thomas Jefferson, the architect and prime author of America's Declaration of Independence, democracy demanded an educated and informed electorate. Jefferson was right, of course. Uninformed opinion is the scourge of democracy.

Democracy is rooted in the twin principles of transparency and accountability. These principles demand that government decisions, and their justification, be made explicit. Justification means bringing forward evidence that the decision is likely to achieve the desired goals, or at least unlikely to lead to undesired consequences. While Canadians may disagree on what goals are desirable, informed opinion demands that the best available evidence, however unpalatable, be presented, carefully scrutinized and publicly debated.

The goal of "Peace, order and good government" enshrined in Canada's constitution depends critically on the collection, presentation and evaluation of evidence about the likely effects of government policies and programs. Yet there is ample evidence that the present government has mounted a systematic campaign to reduce the flow of scientific evidence to Canadians through three major strategies.

- (1) Systematic and deliberate erosion of the capacity of federal institutions to collect evidence;
- (2) Systematic and deliberate erosion of the legislative foundation of evidence-informed regulatory decision-making; and
- (3) Deliberate reduction in the ability of federal scientists and civil society to bring evidence forward into the public debate.

I: EROSION OF FEDERAL EVIDENCE COLLECTION CAPACITY

June 2010. The long-form mandatory census is scrapped, to be replaced with a "voluntary" version. StatsCan Chief Statistician Dr. Munir Sheikh resigns in light of the government's assertion that the voluntary survey is an adequate substitute.

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/story/2010/06/29/census-longform-scrapped.html>
<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/statistics-canada-chief-falls-on-sword-over-census/article1320915/>

September 2011. Federal funding for Canada's Ozone Network, the set of 17 stations distributed across the country designed to collect data on ozone levels, is cut.

<http://www.nature.com/news/2011/110912/full/477257a.html>
<http://www.canada.com/technology/Senior+bureaucrat+cast+doubt+about+ozone+monitoring+cuts/5740883/story.html>

March, 2012. Federal funding for the Canadian Foundation for Climate and Atmospheric Sciences is withdrawn.

April, 2012 – The federal gun registry abandoned. The federal government indicates that not only will the registry be scrapped, but that all the data will be destroyed. Quebec mounts a court challenge to prevent the collected from being destroyed.

<http://news.nationalpost.com/2012/04/05/long-gun-registry-end-celebrated-by-harper-tories/>

May 12, 2002. The Experimental Lakes Area (ELA), Canada's premier research facility on aquatic ecology, and arguably the top such facility in the entire world, is slated for closure.

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/story/2012/05/18/mb-research-facility-experimental-lakes-reaction-winnipeg.html>

May 2012 – Federal funding cuts result in a moratorium on the Major Research Support Program of the Natural Science and Engineering Research Council of Canada. The program is the major source of funding for major environmental research field facilities across the country.

http://www.nserc-crsng.gc.ca/Professors-Professeurs/RTII-OIRI/MRS-ARM_eng.asp

<http://www.edmontonjournal.com/news/Federal+funding+cuts+threaten+Arctic+research+scientists/6614536/story.html>

May, 2012. Federal cuts result in closure of the Polar Environment Atmospheric Research Laboratory (PEARL), a facility designed to provide data on high-arctic climate and air quality.

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/story/2012/02/28/science-pearl-arctic-research.html>

May, 2012: Closure of the National Roundtable on the Environment and the Economy, an independent advisory panel that provided independent advice on environmental sustainability and economic development.

<http://www.thestar.com/news/canada/politics/article/1178373--national-roundtable-on-environment-and-economy-eliminated-for-pushing-a-carbon-tax-conservative-government-says>

May, 2012. The national contaminants program of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans is closed. This program was responsible for monitoring and assessing pollution in Canada's marine environments.

<http://www.vancouversun.com/technology/Ottawa+sinks+pollution+checks/6649695/story.html>

May 2012. Environment Canada's research and monitoring group charged with working with and assessing industrial air pollution is disbanded.

<http://www2.canada.com/nanaimodailynews/news/story.html?id=0d0b03ba-17a4-43ce-89e5-cbb3dc038446>

STRATEGY II: Erosion of legislative framework for regulatory science

Bill C-38, the co-called “Omnibus bill”, includes a number of legislative amendments that reduce the role of scientific evidence in regulatory decision-making, including:

- Repeal of the Kyoto Accord Implementation Act, which eliminates the need for monitoring of greenhouse gas emissions by the federal government.
- Repeal of the existing Canadian Environmental Assessment Act and introduction of a new Act that sets retroactive timelines for environmental assessments and permits federal discretion in delegating assessments to provinces.
- Amendments to Canada’s Species At Risk Act mean that a National Energy Board decision on an approval certificate for a pipeline is now exempted from applying SARA provisions to protect critical habitat for endangered species.
- Amendments to the Fisheries Act such that the Act applies only to major waterways, and to prohibit “serious harm” to a commercial, recreational or aboriginal fishery, while granting cabinet power to exempt fisheries from these categories.
- Amends Navigable Waters Protection Act to permit pipelines and hydro lines to be governed by the National Energy Board.

<http://metronews.ca/news/canada/267765/list-of-omnibus-bills-contents-a-long-one/>

- The federal government has introduced several bills (C-10, S-10, C-394) that introduce mandatory minimum sentencing measures, despite extensive research indicating that mandatory minimum sentences are ineffective, unfair, and do not deter crime, and the fact that several Republican state legislatures have repealed mandatory minimum sentences because of strong evidence they are ineffective.

III: IMPEDING THE ABILITY TO BRING FORWARD EVIDENCE

III.1. IMPEDING CIVIL SOCIETY AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Sept 2006. The federal government cuts funding to the Law Commission of Canada, and independent law reform agency that provided a forum for Canadians and civil society to bring forward evidence pertaining to law reform.

<http://www.lawtimesnews.com/20061002787/Headline-News/Tories-chop-two-legal-programs>

January, 2008. The position of National Science Advisor is eliminated after having been established only 4 years previously.

<http://www.nature.com/news/2008/080130/full/451505a.html>

May 2012 . Federal funding for the National Round Table on the Environment and Economy, an independent panel providing advice on environmental sustainability and economic development, is withdrawn, apparently because the federal government did not like the advice it was getting on carbon taxes.

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/story/2012/05/15/pol-cp-nrtee-baird-silence-critics-cuts.html>

III.2. Muzzling Scientists

The Conservative government has muzzled federal scientists to minimize the risk of their contributing evidence to the public record that is inconsistent with or undermines government policy.

- Department of Fisheries and Oceans scientist Kristi Miller publishes research in the international journal *Science* implicating viruses in shrinking sockeye salmon populations in the Fraser River. After publishing these findings she was banned from talking to the media.
- After publishing findings about one of the largest ozone holes ever found above the arctic, Environment Canada scientist David Tarasick was prohibited by the government from talking to the media for three weeks.
- *The Ottawa Citizen* asked the National Research Council (NRC) about the purpose of a joint study they had been conducting with NASA on falling snow. Eleven different government bureaucrats were consulted on a lengthy email chain in order to draft a response that the government approved of. However, a 15-minute phone conversation with NASA sufficed to get the *Ottawa Citizen* the answer required to this simple question.
- Montreal hosted the International Polar Year Conference in April 2012. Environment Canada scientists at the Conference were shadowed throughout by a “media relations contact” from the government in order to ensure the scientists didn’t say anything that the Conservative government did not want the world to hear.

Links:

<http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v483/n7387/full/483006a.html>

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2012/03/23/f-federal-scientists.html>

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/technology/story/2012/02/17/science-federal-muzzling-scientists.html>

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/technology/story/2010/09/29/federal-scientists-media-government.html>

<http://www.nature.com/news/2010/100929/full/467501a.html>