

When science goes silent

With the muzzling of scientists, Harper's obsession with controlling the message verges on the Orwellian

by [Jonathon Gatehouse](#) on Friday, May 3, 2013 5:00am -



Chris Wattie/Reuters

As far as the government scientist was concerned, it was a bit of fluff: an early morning interview about great white sharks last summer with *Canada AM*, the kind of innocuous and totally apolitical media commentary the man used to deliver 30 times or more each year as the resident shark expert in the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO). So he sent an email off to Ottawa notifying department flaks about the request, and when no response had been received by the next morning, just went ahead and did it.

After all, in the past such initiative was rewarded. His superiors were happy to have him grab some limelight for the department and its research, so much so they once gave him an award as the DFO's spokesperson of the year. But as he found out, things have changed under Stephen Harper's Conservatives. Soon after arriving at his offices, the scientist was called before his regional director and given a formal verbal reprimand: talk to the media again without the explicit permission of the minister's office, he was warned, and there would be serious consequences—like a suspension without pay, or even dismissal.

"He can't understand it. The interview was of no consequence and had absolutely no relevance to government policy," says Gary Corbett, president of the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada (PIPSC), the union that represents 30,000 government researchers, technicians and science support workers. "It really burst his bubble. They've taken away the impetus to educate the public." Corbett shared details of the incident for the first time with *Macleans* but not the scientist's identity, for fear he might face further sanction. It's just one of many such stories of muzzled federal scientists and suppressed research that are being brought to the union's attention, he says. All against the backdrop of sweeping cuts to water, air and wildlife monitoring programs, a total restructuring of federal environmental reviews, and the downloading of responsibility for lakes and rivers to the provinces. "It's almost like this government doesn't want any of this stuff to be open to public discussion," says the union leader. "What we're seeing is a total lockdown."

Since taking power in 2006, Stephen Harper's government has rarely been caught on the wrong foot. Disciplined on the hustings, in the House, and above all with the media, Tory ministers and MPs have largely avoided the gaffes and unvarnished opinions that used to plague the conservative movement. But to many of its critics, Ottawa's obsession with controlling the message has become so all-encompassing that it now threatens both the

health of Canada's democracy and the country's reputation abroad.

And the principal battleground—where the micromanaging impulse seems to have taken on a zeal fuelled by ideological distrust—is the environment. Since Harper pulled out of the Kyoto Protocol, citing skepticism about the cost and efficacy of international efforts to halt climate change (and saving the country as much as \$14 billion in penalties for non-compliance) his government has been stuck with an unenviable sales job: trying to promote the expansion of Alberta's oil sands—a significant driver of the national economy—while downplaying the sector's rapidly growing greenhouse gas emissions and the government's own inaction. One strategy was to brand the bitumen as an “ethical” alternative to oil from corrupt or repressive regimes in the Middle East and elsewhere. Another was to go on the attack. Environmental groups opposing pipeline plans have been denounced as “radicals,” accused of taking funding from “foreign special interests” and subject to special audits regarding their charitable status from the Canada Revenue Agency. And just this past week, Natural Resources Minister Joe Oliver picked a fight with NASA's James Hansen, accusing the recently retired climate scientist of “crying wolf all the time” and exaggerating the oil sands' contribution to global warming.

Neither approach has borne much fruit. The proposed Keystone XL pipeline, which would pump Canadian crude to refineries along the Texas Gulf coast, remains mired in the U.S. approval process, while activists and even some policy-makers make it the focal point of their fight against “dirty oil.” Meanwhile Canada's global reputation on green issues has taken a beating. (A January 2013 report card on international environmental performance based on indicators like air quality and biodiversity ranked Canada 15th among the world's 17 most developed nations.) And all those audits—almost 900, at a cost of \$5 million—resulted in just one group, Physicians for Global Survival, losing their tax-deductible status for exceeding the limits on political spending.

But if Ottawa hasn't found a way to manage the activists or foreign public opinion, it's shown remarkable resolve—and success—in denying its opponents federally funded ammunition. According to internal Environment Canada documents, obtained by Climate Change Network Canada via Access to Information, the amount of attention the media paid to federal climate change research dropped precipitously—80 per cent fewer stories—once the procedures for gaining access to government scientists were tightened during Harper's first mandate. In the first nine months of 2008, for example, the department's four leading researchers were quoted in a total of 12 newspaper stories, versus 99 over the same period the year before.

Meanwhile, the list of cases where government scientists have been effectively gagged from speaking about peer-reviewed research—sometimes even after its publication in prestigious international journals—grows.

- David Tarasick, an Environment Canada scientist, was prevented from doing interviews about a *Nature* paper on an unprecedented hole in the ozone layer over the Arctic in the fall of 2011. Reporters were instead provided with “media lines” he had no hand in creating. (Tarasick was eventually given permission to talk two weeks later, well after interest had died down.)

- Scott Dallimore, a Natural Resources geologist, was denied permission to talk about 2010 work for the same journal on a massive flood that inundated northern Canada 13,000 years ago—despite his attempts to assure his bosses via email that it was “a blue sky paper,” with no links to “minerals, energy or anthropogenic climate change.”
- Kristi Miller, a salmon researcher with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, produced a 2011 paper raising the possibility that a mysterious virus was responsible for the rapid decline of the sockeye population in the Fraser River. It took eight months before government minders finally freed her to discuss her findings in an appearance before the Cohen commission, a federal judicial inquiry into the dwindling fish stocks.
- Mary Waiser, an Environment Canada water researcher, was denied permission to speak about two papers she’d written for the department disclosing the presence of chemicals and pharmaceuticals in Saskatchewan’s Wascana Creek, downstream from Regina’s sewage treatment plant.

Sometimes, the efforts to silence scientists verge into the Orwellian. In one widely reported 2012 incident, Environment Canada researchers attending the International Polar Year conference in Montreal were shadowed by media handlers tasked with squelching any impromptu conversations with reporters about climate change or dying polar bears.

At first, federal researchers reacted to the restrictions with bewilderment and anger. Last summer, hundreds of them gathered in their white lab coats on Parliament Hill to protest what they see as Stephen Harper’s “war on science,” staging a mock funeral to mark the death of evidence. But now, with funding cuts and program closures that were buried in two successive omnibus budget bills starting to bite—close to 1,900 scientists have received layoff warning letters as part of wider cuts across the public service—morale has hit an all-time low. “To call the current environment ‘dysfunctional’ would not be overstating things,” one federal scientist, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of repercussions, told *Maclean’s*. “Your bosses are only ever following marching orders, so people are made to feel that there’s no use in complaining because we are so far away from the level at which decisions are made that there’s no hope our concerns will ever make it anywhere.”

Another researcher, who is scheduled to lose his job this summer, but fears speaking out will hurt his severance, laments how the current government has “politicized” the role of public servants. “It’s almost as if that job we had as scientists to explain things to the Canadian public is gone.” The scientist says he and his colleagues always understood that certain lines couldn’t be crossed when they dealt with the media—stepping outside your area of expertise or criticizing government policy were both definite no-nos, for example. But soon after Harper won his first minority in 2006, it became clear that the minister’s office viewed every media interaction as a minefield—to be entered into only if absolutely unavoidable. The interview requests he received from national media were routinely denied by political staff in Ottawa, he says, while even the most low-key local demands would take as long as four weeks to be approved. “They’re just not keen on having any expert knowledge delivered from Canadian government scientists to the outside world,” he says. Lately, he finds the media have stopped even trying to seek his input.

To be fair, governments of all stripes have been known to spar with the scientists on their payroll, especially when economic priorities come into conflict with conservation goals. Jeff Hutchings, a former DFO biologist, now a Killam chair at Dalhousie University, recalls an incident in the early 1990s where he and some federal colleagues were prevented from giving a paper at an international conference because their findings—that seals weren’t impacting cod stocks—were at odds with official department policy. But that was an exception, he says, not the rule. Current policy doesn’t just seek to dampen the odd controversial story, it passes every bit of information through a political filter from which almost nothing emerges. “All the government scientists I know tell me that it’s never been worse,” says Hutchings. “It’s like an Iron Curtain has been drawn across the communication

of science in this country. And I think there's reason for all of us to be worried about that."

A recent report compiled by the University of Victoria's environmental law clinic details a variety of ways in which government scientists are being muzzled. There's the growing use of "approved lines" or sometimes full-on scripts—crafted by everyone but the researchers—to cast findings in the least controversial, and often most boring, way. And then there are the now-institutionalized delays, where interview requests aren't necessarily denied, but put off so long that stories appear without comment from federal experts, and the media moves on. Part of that may just be the bureaucracy catching the no-news-is-good-news zeitgeist. After the National Research Council denied an interview request about a study of snowfall patterns last March, *Ottawa Citizen* reporter Tom Spears filed an Access to Information request and discovered that 11 government employees had spent the better part of a day worrying about what he might write, exchanging more than 50 emails. It was a sharp contrast to what happened when he called NASA—also a party to the study. It took the U.S. agency just 15 minutes to put him in contact with one of their climatologists.

The creeping level of paranoia within the government is even apparent in the training materials its departments hand out to designated spokespeople. *Meeting the Media*, a 2008 DFO publication, stresses vigilance at all times—even the most banal interaction can be twisted into a story. "You may be situated on an ice floe when the questions pop up on your handheld device from someone in a warm newsroom many kilometres or even continents away." As a consequence, says the pamphlet, it's always better to "stay inside the box," reverting to prepared "anchor answers" and "top line messages." And on the odd occasion where scientists or bureaucrats end up face-to-face with reporters, they should treat it like an encounter with a bear. Loss of eye contact shows discomfort, crossed arms appear defensive, says a section on non-verbal communication. If trapped in a scrum, it instructs, keep your responses brief, then at first opportunity excuse yourself, leaving "at a regular pace, not a run."

The 128-page UVic report, prepared at the behest of Ottawa-based Democracy Watch, formed the basis of a February complaint to federal Information Commissioner Suzanne Legault, charging that the government is systematically obstructing the rights of the media and the Canadian public to timely access to scientific information. In early April, Legault's office launched an investigation, notifying seven departments—including Environment Canada, DFO, Natural Resources and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency—that it expects full co-operation.

Calvin Sandborn, the law professor who oversees the clinic, says he's pleased that the complaint is being taken seriously. "I don't think there are many more important issues than this question of concealing scientific information from the general public," he says. "It's such a threat to the democratic process." The information chill that has settled over government reaches far beyond the media, he argues. Even in his own work, he's noticed that regulatory questions that used to be answered via a quick phone call now must be submitted in writing, with the responses often arriving weeks later.

The Harper government hasn't offered any official reaction to the information commissioner's investigation, but its general response to the charges that scientists are being muzzled has been to deny that any problem exists. *Macleans*' requests for interviews with Keith Ashfield, the minister of fisheries, was denied. And there was no response from the office of Peter Kent, the minister of the environment. A promised interview with Gary Goodyear, the minister of state for science and technology, never materialized. His spokeswoman provided a brief statement: "There have been no recent changes to the government's communication policy for federal civil servants," it reads. "Government scientists and experts are readily available to share their research with the media and the public." It goes on to note the 500 studies published last year by Natural Resources Canada, and the "nearly 1,000" scientific papers from Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. And it states that Environment Canada participated in more than 1,300 media interviews in 2012. (Although how many of those were weather-related—the department's meteorologists are free to speak to reporters without seeking approval, unlike the rest of their colleagues—is

unclear.)

The government also points out that it has been supporting Canadian science in very tangible ways, steadily increasing investments in research and technology—more than \$11 billion in the current budget—even as it has tightened its belt in other areas.

To its critics, however, that funding boost—which has favoured applied science and commercialization over basic research and “pure” sciences—only serves to underline what they say is the government’s true agenda. “They’re all for science that will produce widgets that they can sell and tax,” says David Schindler, a professor of ecology at the University of Alberta. “But it’s clear that environmental scientists are lumped right down there with Greenpeace in their view.”

Such distrust of Conservative motives seems to be spreading, even beyond our borders. *Nature*, the BBC and most recently *The Scientist* have all raised the alarm about the soundness of federal research in Canada. And foreign scientists are becoming increasingly leery of collaborating with their Canadian government counterparts. This past winter, Andreas Muenchow, an oceanographer at the University of Delaware, revealed details of a sweeping new non-disclosure agreement he was asked to sign before embarking on a joint study of Arctic waters. “I feel that it threatens my academic freedom and potentially muzzles my ability to publish data and interpretation and talk timely on science issues,” he wrote in a blog posting. And a new publication procedure that will see all DFO collaborations vetted by bureaucrats before the manuscripts can be submitted to journals is causing similar consternation. Anna Kuparinen, a fisheries researcher with the University of Helsinki, told *Maclean’s* that she’s currently reconsidering a project with a DFO scientist. “There’s a possibility that something in our research could cause problems,” she says. “And for a young scientist, not being able to put your work into an article is a nightmare scenario.” With funding from the Finnish government already in hand, she thinks it might be wiser to move the project to a different country.

Of course, such threats are unlikely to change Ottawa’s course. Harper has a lengthy record of picking fights with number-crunchers of all varieties—firing the president of the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission, provoking the resignation of the chief statistician of Canada, and repeatedly refusing to play ball with Parliament’s independent budget officer. One recent Ipsos Reid poll suggests that combative approach might be chipping away at the Prime Minister’s reputation—69 per cent of respondents called the Harper government “too secretive,” while 63 per cent said they weren’t living up to past promises to be “ethical, open and transparent.”

But other surveys indicate that the party can still yield political gains from positions that are at odds with a majority of Canadians. An Angus Reid survey on global warming, released earlier this month, found that 58 per cent of Canadians now accept climate change as a fact, attributing it to man-made activities. But that’s a position that’s endorsed by just 42 per cent of Albertans, and only 38 per cent of Tory voters.

The approach the Harper government is taking to its scientists isn’t that dissimilar to that of George W. Bush during his two terms as U.S. president, when there were frequent charges of muzzling on climate and environmental issues. “Information control is an explicit form of power,” notes Heather Douglas, a chair of science and society in the University of Waterloo’s department of philosophy. Douglas, an American who has only been in the country for 15 months, is still a little shocked by the naked and unapologetic manner in which the Harper government is going about it all, as well as the muted response of most Canadians. “If this was happening in the States, we’d be well past the tipping point,” she says. “This is the kind of thing that makes Americans go crazy.”

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