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Katherine Richter
University of King's College, kpiet_14@hotmail.com

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Muzzles and Mixed Messages: Issues Between Science and the Federal Government In Canada’s Past and Present

Katherine Richter  
University of King’s college

Abstract

Richter examines the historical relationship between the federal government of Canada and the scientists it has employed over the past few decades. She compares science policy and practices from leaders such as Diefenbaker and Trudeau to the policies currently followed by Stephen Harper’s government. Richter asks what might be achieved by following those policies, despite the criticism received by the science community. The paper will ultimately argue that the federal government and scientists have often had a contentious relationship, and the often criticized policies of the current Conservative government are not at all novel. Ultimately, she argues that these Conservative policies are intended to present a unified political front to the broader Canadian public and to the world.

Keywords: science, federal government, policy, public, political history
The policy of “muzzling” scientists who work for the federal government has received plenty of attention in Canada over the last six years. Scientists, scholars, research committees, and the media have all accused Stephen Harper’s current Conservative government of creating policies that keep scientists from presenting their work, that require them to make media statements through government handlers, or that bog down the process of interviews through the need for seemingly endless amounts of paperwork. Techniques such as these led the NDP in the House of Commons to question: when would the Conservative government “end their war against our scientists?”

Very few would deny that these policies and practices have a silencing effect on scientists. The question then is what purpose these policies might serve. This paper will examine the history between the federal government and the scientists it employed over the past few decades, and how that relationship has been marred by the same problems the Conservative government is accused of creating today. It will then examine the Conservative government’s current policy in regards to science, of which muzzling is one part, and will ask what is the intended objective. This paper will ultimately argue that the federal government and scientists have often had a contentious relationship, and the policies the Conservative government is currently implementing are not new. They are part of a larger plan by the government to get scientific researchers to follow and uphold the goals the government intends to pursue. These policies are essentially in place to control information, intended to present a unified political front to the world and to the broader Canadian public, while simultaneously opening Canada to international investment and economic interests.

Canada has often been recognized as a leader and innovator in science and technology, and our history is studded with examples that showcase our talent. Take, for example, the hydrofoil boat invented by Alexander Graham Bell and Casey Baldwin, or the invention of insulin by Banting and Best. Canadians themselves are interested in

science and technology; one report released in 2014 by the Council of Canadian Academies put the Canadian public in first place out of 33 countries for showing a strong interest in “new scientific discoveries and technological developments.” However, this history has been marred by struggles between the federal government and scientists over differing opinions, funding research and political ideology. This has not been happening only in the last six years, but since science became a subject of interest to the government.

While the muzzling of scientists is a major criticism towards the Conservative government’s recent policies against science and scientists, it is only one part of those policies. Other actions include slashing funding to various research boards or councils, or insisting on the appointment of various people that the media and scientists claim have no right in interfering with scientific progress. Bureaucratic or even Prime Ministerial influence has also been claimed as a direct affront to science. However, it is important to note that all these policy actions have taken place before in Canada’s history.

The federal government and scientists have enjoyed a rocky relationship for decades, and to claim surprise at the current government’s policies is to ignore Canada’s political past. Take for example the criticism of budget cuts to science. In the past few years, climate science has been a particular target for the federal government. As Andrew Cuddy points out in his paper on the Harper government’s approach to climate science research, funding from the federal government for university-based research (through channels such as the National Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, or NSERC) has been slashed, making NSERC’s budget fall to less than half of their original funding since 2010-2011. This is particularly upsetting for researchers, as the country is currently dealing with a climate change crisis. As one scientist from Dalhousie University noted, “Canada will lose the capacity to understand its own environment and will have to rely on other countries to know what’s happening to it.”

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3. Cuddy, Troubling Evidence, 15.
4. Ibid.
the Harper government’s omnibus budget bill released in July 2012, also cut funding and issued letters of potential layoff to thousands of scientists and researchers in the federal government “on a level not previously seen, or tolerated.”

These concerns about the federal government cutting funding for scientific research (while valid) are not new. Issues such as these have been arising for decades. For example, many saw the creation of the Science Council of Canada (or SCC) in the mid-1960s as a gesture that gave new importance to the scientific and post-war world and that spoke to the important financial and advisory relationship between science and the federal government. The SCC relied on federal funding, and for years provided independent “arms-length” advice to both the public and the federal government by releasing scientific reports on a variety of subjects. However, the Council ran into trouble in 1978 when it released a report on the problems facing the Canadian industry and manufacturing areas. It essentially implied the economic structures of the country were so poor that Canada could be considered a “third-world country.”

This did not sit well with the federal government, and by 1985, Brian Mulroney’s Conservative government released a report (also known as the Nielsen report) that would lead to the decimation of the SCC’s budget (which halved their five million dollar budget). Although the SCC managed to hang on with its new minuscule budget that barely allowed for the continuation of its research, let alone funding for new projects, the budget cut represented a blow that the SCC could never recover from, and the program folded in 1992. The federal government began to perceive the SCC as a threat to its economic policies, and used the Nielsen report to justify its funding cuts to that threat, an attitude that is also seen in today’s political climate.

Another major criticism of the Harper government’s current actions towards science and scientific research comes from its perceived interference with the scientific community through bureaucrats, ministerial spokespersons and even media handlers. One

8. Ibid., 125.
9. Ibid., 126.
of the most striking examples was in 2012, when federal government media handlers shadowed Environment Canada scientists to prevent them discussing polar bears or climate change with reporters at an international conference on polar issues.\(^\text{10}\) Chris Turner cites another example of non-scientific interference in scientific business through the implementation of Bill C-38. According to Turner, this bill, which so drastically cut federally funded science projects and fired hundreds of researchers, was put together in a set of private meetings by lawyers, party staffers, a farmer, management consultants and a fighter pilot – but no scientists or researchers.\(^\text{11}\) How, Turner seems to be asking, can we expect science to be given the proper respect it deserves in policy if no scientists are involved in the decisions that will decide its future?

Yet this political interference in what many consider the realm of scientists has been around since scientific research began to interest the federal government – indeed, some interference has been a direct result of the Prime Minister himself. This attitude of muzzling (or at least ignoring) scientists and industry experts can be striking. One of the most famous examples comes from Prime Minister John Diefenbaker, who led the Progressive Conservative party in the federal government from 1957 to 1963. He held an attitude that gave low priority to scientists and he also apparently objected to being surrounded “with bureaucratic advisors – scientists or otherwise.”\(^\text{12}\)

This dislike of other opinions would be demonstrated in Diefenbaker’s decision to cancel the Avro Arrow project in 1959. He based his decision on the growing costs for the project, and the so-called “obsolescence” of having a manned bomber threaten Canadian airspace, ignoring the hundreds of calls from industry experts and scientists to save the project.\(^\text{13}\) With one stroke, Diefenbaker cut the program and sent many of Canada’s top scientists and industry leaders looking for jobs elsewhere.

Diefenbaker also demonstrated his attitude towards scientists by insisting on the construction of a new radar laboratory in his home


\(^{13}\) Doern, *Science and Politics in Canada*, 145.
riding of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan in 1957. Researchers had suggested building the laboratory in the area of the nearby city of Saskatoon, as it would be closer to the University of Saskatchewan and suited the preferences of the Defense Research Board. Instead, the laboratory was built in Prince Albert, and served as another example of Diefenbaker’s refusal to listen to scientists, and to instead pursue agendas and plans he believed were right.\(^\text{14}\) This attitude might well come from Diefenbaker’s desire to uphold his particular image: a politician concerned with the common man, not the bureaucrats and pencil-pushers. By doing what he thought was right, Diefenbaker demonstrated to the voting public that “experts” had no sway over his final decisions. Kenneth McNaught goes so far as to label Diefenbaker’s party leadership as near-populist.\(^\text{15}\) While these examples may stem from Diefenbaker’s personal motivations (doing good for the average voter) or mistrusts (of scientists and bureaucrats), they are still somewhat shocking, even in today’s cynical political-scientific climate.

Another example of political interference in the scientific sphere can be found by examining the history of the Defense Research Board (DRB). This board, which was created in 1947 and lasted until 1977, was designed to meet Canada’s research needs during the post-war years. Its agenda was directly related to the federal government in that its mandate was to serve the Minister and related Department of National Defense (DND).\(^\text{16}\) Both scientists and industry leaders sat on the board. However, by the 1950’s tensions were rising over the new implementation of portfolios such as the Department of Defense Production, which was seen by some as adding political opinions and more bureaucrats to the scientific realm.\(^\text{17}\) This complaint would be repeated when experts in administration and organization, commissioned by the federal government, released a report criticizing the structure of the DND in 1972. The subsequent criticism from the DND – how were non-military and non-scientific ‘experts’ able to understand, let alone


\(^{17}\) Ibid., 50.
criticize the work of military science and technology – was ignored.\(^\text{18}\) In another example, all appointments to the DRB had to be approved by the Minister of National Defense, from the secretaries to the highest researchers on the board.\(^\text{19}\) Ultimately, these examples may be reminiscent of policies pursued in recent years by Stephen Harper’s Conservative government, but they do demonstrate that political interference has the power to effect some serious change, and it has done so for a very long time.

Finally, Harper’s government has been most heavily criticized on the “muzzling” of scientists – that is, preventing federal scientists from presenting papers, implementing new media policies that forbid them from talking to the media, or even threatening them with severe sanctions should they not comply. For example, Jonathon Gatehouse’s article for Maclean’s magazine describes a situation where a federal scientist at the Department of Fisheries and Oceans was given a formal reprimand for talking to the media without receiving permission from the minister’s office. He was informed he could potentially lose his job if the incident occurred again.\(^\text{20}\) This situation was criticized as a lost educational opportunity for other scientists and for the Canadian public. It should be noted that the scientist was not named in the Maclean’s article, for fear of “further sanctions.”\(^\text{21}\) This fear is not isolated to the Department of Fisheries and Oceans: one report jointly released by Evidence for Democracy and Simon Fraser University noted that 90% of federal scientists felt they were unable “to speak freely about their research.”\(^\text{22}\)

That same report heavily criticized the new media policies of government departments, including Environment Canada, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, the Canadian Space Agency, and Natural Resources Canada. These policies have attracted plenty of attention. For example, the media policy at Environment Canada insists that scientists put all media inquiries to a media relations officer, who will then determine if the scientist can respond or not. That same media policy also insists that scientists give no personal

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 61.
\(^{19}\) Ibid., 52.
\(^{21}\) Gatehouse, “When Science Goes Silent.”
opinions when speaking in an official capacity, either on the subject at hand or on Environment Canada policy in general. These restrictive and time-consuming policies have resulted in a significant decrease in the amount of media coverage that science and science-related issues now receive, writes Andrew Cuddy in a critique on the current government’s approaches to climate science research. Cuddy also notes that this same Environment Canada policy could potentially violate the government’s Communications Policy, which recognizes institutions must understand and appreciate the importance of the “24 hour media environment.” These are only a few examples, but they serve as proof that the Harper government is using bureaucracy, power and policy to stop (or at the very least, slow down) scientist’s attempts to communicate important results and breakthroughs with the media.

However, once again, this idea of “muzzling” scientists through government policy is not new, and the troubles of the now-dead Science Council of Canada (SCC), created in the mid-1960s, serve as an excellent example. It was created as a step towards “technological sovereignty”, and was designed to assist to the federal government and the Canadian public by providing “arms-length” advice on science and policy. It was supposed to operate separately from the influences of the government: this was what gave it credibility. Yet as it fell under criticism in the 1970’s and 1980’s, the Minister of State for Science and Technology suddenly suggested the SCC be merged into his department, thereby removing that “arm’s length” position that was so important to the Council’s independent nature. The Council was horrified, and while they would manage to keep their independence, the budget cuts that accompanied these suggestions would kill the council. Interestingly, in public press conferences held around the same time, Council members described the financial cuts as “an attempt to muzzle the Council and destroy its independent voice (emphasis added).” Thanks to this massive budget reduction, the Council could only serve in the late 1980’s as

27. Ibid., 125.
28. Ibid.
an information station, telling Canadians where their scientific futures could have lain, instead of their original purpose, which had been to inform and even influence the federal government and the Canadian public based on sound science. Just as federal scientists are silenced today by government policy, so too were scientists from the 1970s and 1980s.

It is important to note that these were policies upheld by both Liberal and Conservative political parties in the federal government. Brian Mulroney’s Progressive Conservatives may have profited from this silencing (or perhaps took inspiration from it – they, after all, released the Nielsen report), but it became an issue under Pierre Trudeau’s Liberals in the 1970’s. Trudeau’s two terms were marked by demonstrations of strength in his majority position, and included acts such as the enlargement of the Office of the Prime Minister and the consolidation of several departmental organizations. This desire to demonstrate the power of the federal government could be seen in these silencing policies, as well as the criticisms of the DND in 1972. Perhaps Trudeau’s government used their majority to prove to others they had the power to do what they wanted, and could chose to listen to whomever they wanted? Whatever the government’s motivation, it was scientists that suffered for it.

Ultimately, these historical examples demonstrate that the policies pursued by Harper’s Conservative government are not new, and that past federal governments have pursued similar policies. Whether through funding cuts, interference by bureaucrats at all levels, or implementation of media and management policies, the government has proven it is not afraid to use the tools it has at its disposal such as legislative power and political clout to silence its scientific critics, or to override them should they not serve the government’s interests. The question is, what purpose does the government believe this muzzling policy serves – and does that purpose serve the Canadian public in a positive or a negative way? There may be a variety of reasons for the Harper government to follow this trend of silencing or ignoring scientific opinion, but one of the major explanations seems to be a desire for a show of power and cohesive agreement within all government departments. This may

stem from the Stephen Harper’s own practice to never be seen making public gaffes. As Jonathon Gatehouse for Maclean’s writes, Harper is “rarely caught on the wrong foot [and is] Disciplined…above all with the media.”31 This discipline comes from the control of information, and knowing who has said what in relation to government policy.

If Stephen Harper desires that the federal government exude a sense of power and control, he must implement media policies that restrict the federal government’s employee’s ability to say what they want – differing opinions on the same subject looks bad in the media, and should be avoided at all cost. With the enormous number of public servants in the government, the risk that someone might say something negative against government policy rises, and with scientific crises becoming a hot-button issue, the Harper government “no longer trusts scientists to avoid controversy,”32 especially on politically sensitive issues like climate change or the oil sands. It is more essential to demonstrate to voters that every agency of the federal government is in an agreement with one another. This can be done in a variety of ways: implementing new media policies for particular government departments, restricting access to evidence, or by cutting programs that might lead to the discovery of that evidence. The Harper government has also favoured the use of experts who are likely to agree with the official party line in areas of science. For example, in 2007 the Harper Government announced the creation of the Science, Technology and Innovation Council, which was mandated to provide the government independent opinions and information on scientific and technological issues. However, only four full-time scientists were a part of this Council: the other fourteen members were business and industry experts, government officials and administrators.33

One must be careful of criticizing the government’s desire for conformity too harshly. After all, many would agree that it is not unreasonable for a government to expect their employees to respect the official position taken in the media, or presented to the public. As Andrew Leach writes in Maclean’s, “To speak out publicly against government policy is, by the current definition, fundamentally at

odds with the role of a public servant in our democracy.” Federal scientists are hired to research and present their findings on particular subjects to the government. They should not be commenting on issues that do not concern them, nor should they be using their positions as a soapbox for their own ideas. And while many have criticized the government for taking this policy on employee cooperation too far, it does reflect the desire of Stephen Harper to have a government possessing one unified voice.

With this desire to have a unanimous voice comes the simultaneous ignoring of voices that do not conform to the government’s policy ideas. For the Harper Conservatives, this involves the shutting out of scientists and the inclusion of business and industry experts. Again, this is not necessarily a Conservative-only policy – some have argued science has been subordinate to industry since 1993 with the political shift from the Mulroney Conservatives to the Chrétien Liberals55 – but the Harper government continues to use this policy to their advantage, and to put business interests before scientific interests.

One of the most cited examples of this attitude favouring business interests over science interests comes from the government’s implementation of Bill C-38, an omnibus bill that was read into the law in 2012. This bill continued the tradition of having government departments such as the National Research Council perform, in the words of Chris Turner, “‘concierge’ services for business and technology”36 – that is, science should only be used as a tool to assist the government’s business and industrial interests. It resulted in massive funding cuts for departments such as Fisheries and Oceans and Parks Canada. Again, it should be noted that, despite massive cuts and changes to scientific programs across Canada, scientists were not consulted during the creation of Bill C-38 in 2011.37 The voices that the Conservative Party chose to listen to were not scientists, but were business executives and policy writers.

Authors such as Turner also write that the government intends to use science as a tool for business interests, rather than seeing value in science itself. Science and research now has a purpose of “creating

37. Ibid., 29.
economic opportunities for industry”, while the government’s task “is to assist in that process in whatever way it can.” If science is only to be used as a tool to bring about economic investments, then the policies the government is pursuing make sense: they can cut scientific programs that do not fulfill this purpose (and potentially hurt this economic investment), can save money to put towards industrial and business incentives, and can silence any scientist who would only get in the way of the new economic policy.

If this is the policy that the Conservative government has chosen to follow, what effect does this have on the average Canadian citizen? The general consensus seems to be that there are negative effects. One of the biggest concerns is for the democratic process in relation to the government’s muzzling policies. If voters cannot access information that matters to them about their government, they cannot make informed decisions. The federal government does not actively circulate their funding decisions or policy implementations through the public sphere thanks to their media policies – instead, as Evidence For Democracy notes in their critique of Environment Canada’s media policies, there is a focus on message control rather than supporting effective communication between federal departments and the public. How can citizens make the right choice for them if they cannot access the information they require?

These types of policies also bring about negative connotations for Canada on the international stage. For example, Gatehouse’s Maclean’s article noted that serious damage had been done to Canada’s scientific reputation, and that scientists were losing funding opportunities due to sponsors’ leeriness of the Canadian government’s reaction. For a country that is synonymous with nature and that has such a rich history of scientific achievement, this poses a problem. What does Canada as a country become when it loses a part of its treasured identity?

Finally, it is arguable that science plays a major role in the Canadian system – even if, as the Conservative government puts forward, it is just a ‘concierge’ for business interests. According to Jeff Kinder and Frank Welsh, this scientific and technological system has

38. Ibid., 112.
developed thanks to a unique relationship between “business, academic and government sectors.”  

If the government wishes to continue to use this system, all three sectors must be properly funded and respected. In essence, the government has to hold up its end of the agreement. Otherwise, the system risks underperformance or failure, and many aspects of Canadians’ lives could be affected.  

If the government wishes to continue to provide Canadian citizens a high quality of life, they must fund and encourage the development of science in the federal sectors. Ultimately, science and politics have enjoyed an uneasy relationship in Canada for decades, and the criticisms of the Conservative’s policies are just the latest in a series of decisions that echo this relationship. These are policies that reflect the desire to have conformity and unity in all departments of the federal government, and that also reflect science’s decreasing importance to the government – except in cases of economic value. With these policies affecting Canada’s reputation on the international stage, and potentially harming the democratic process at home, it remains to be seen whether the current Conservative government will continue to uphold them. What is clear, however, is that there is no easy balance between science and politics in Canada.

42. Ibid.
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