



Muzzling scientists is an assault on democracy

By David Suzuki with contributions from David Suzuki Foundation Communications Manager Ian Hanington.

Access to information is a basic foundation of democracy. Canada's [Charter of Rights and Freedoms](#) also gives us "freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication."

We must protect these rights. As we alter the chemical, physical and biological properties of the biosphere, we face an increasingly uncertain future, and the best information we have to guide us comes from science. That scientists — and even [librarians](#) — are speaking out against what appear to be increasing efforts to suppress information shows we have cause for concern. The situation has become so alarming that Canada's [Information Commissioner is investigating](#) seven government departments in response to a complaint that they're "muzzling" scientists.

The submission from the University of Victoria's Environmental Law Centre and Democracy Watch alleges that "the federal government is preventing the media and the Canadian public from speaking to government scientists for news stories — especially when the scientists' research or point of view runs counter to current Government policies on matters such as environmental protection, oil sands development, and climate change" and that this "impoverishes the public debate on issues of significant national concern."

The complaint and investigation follow numerous similar charges from scientists and organizations such as the [Canadian Science Writers' Association](#) and the World Federation of Science Journalists, and publications such as the science journal [Nature](#). Hundreds of scientists marched on Parliament Hill last July to mark '[the death of evidence](#)'.

The list of actions prompting these grievances is long. It includes shutting the world-renowned [Experimental Lakes Area](#), axing the [National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy](#), eliminating funding for the [Canadian Foundation for Climate and Atmospheric Sciences](#) and prohibiting federal scientists from speaking about research on subjects ranging from [ozone](#) to climate change to [salmon](#).

All of this has been taking place as the federal government guts environmental laws and cuts funding for environmental departments through its [omnibus budget bills](#). It has justified those massive environmental policy changes in part by saying the review process was slow and inefficient, but [research by scientists at the University of Toronto](#), published in the [Canadian Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences](#), "found no evidence that regulatory review in Canada was inefficient, even when regulators had an ongoing load of over 600 projects for review at any given time."

The government appears determined to challenge any information, person or organization that could stand in the way of its plans for rapid tar sands expansion and transport and sale of raw resources as quickly as possible to any country with money.

The results have been astounding. An Environment Canada document leaked to the Climate Action Network states, "Media coverage of climate change science, our most high-profile issue, has been reduced by over 80 per cent."

In the environmental movement, we've become accustomed to attacks and attempts by government and its proxies to silence us. We've been called everything from 'radicals' to 'un-Canadian' to 'money-launderers' Federal Treasury Board President Tony Clement even blamed the David Suzuki Foundation and me for opposition to the proposed TransCanada west-to-east pipeline, a project we have yet to say a word about! Some of the ongoing media slurs have been even sillier. Are they that threatened by credible scientific research that might stand in the way of their current liquidation policies?

Canada is a large country with the longest coastline in the world, and is particularly sensitive to climate fluctuations, especially in economic sectors like agriculture, fisheries, forestry and tourism. We aspire to be an "energy superpower". Surely, understanding the effects of climate change should be at the top of our agenda.

In a truly open and democratic society, ideas, policies and legislation are exposed to scrutiny, debate and criticism. Information is shared freely. Governments support research that makes the country stronger by ensuring its policies are in the best interests of the people. A government that values its citizens more than its industrial backers does not fear information and opposition.

Countries where governments hold a tight rein on information, shut down or stifle research that runs counter to their priorities, and demonize and attack opponents are never good places to live. We have to make sure Canada doesn't become one.

April 11, 2013

<http://www.davidsuzuki.org/blogs/science-matters/2013/04/muzzling-scientists-is-an-assault-on-democracy/>