
Politicians who reject science not fit to lead

Science Matters

By David Suzuki & Faisal Moola

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My life as a scientist got its boost in the United States. I was attending college in Massachusetts in 1957 on a scholarship when the now former Soviet Union launched the first Sputnik satellite.

The event also launched the space race between the U.S.S.R. and the U.S., as the Americans started pouring money into the sciences in an attempt to catch up.

I was given funding to continue my graduate studies at the University of Chicago. On getting my PhD, I went on to work as a research associate at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee.

Although the facility was built in 1942 as part of a top secret program to purify uranium for the Manhattan Project, its focus had shifted to basic biology by the time I arrived, and it became a centre of world-class research and international cooperation.

Times have changed. I wish I could say that we've evolved when it comes to science. But sometimes reading the news and listening to the pronouncements of politicians, especially south of the border, I'm bewildered by the rampant ignorance about science and the antipathy toward it.

One example I just came across was a comment by the Governor of Maine, Paul LePage, about bisphenol-A, or BPA, which is used mainly in plastic containers and toys. Health Canada recently declared BPA a toxic chemical because of its links to breast cancer, developmental problems in children, prostate disease, and fertility issues.

Little Beards For Women

In response to calls for his state to restrict BPA use, Mr. LePage said, "There hasn't been any science that identifies that there is a problem. The only thing that I've heard is if you take a plastic bottle and put it in the microwave and you heat it up, it gives off a chemical similar to estrogen. So the worst case is some women may have little beards."

It's a profoundly ignorant statement for anyone to make, let alone a state governor, but it's only the tip of the iceberg. Science is taking a beating in the U.S., and we're starting to see a similar phenomenon here in Canada, although not to as great an extent.

Far more dangerous are attempts by U.S. politicians to attack the overwhelming scientific evidence that human activity is causing catastrophic climate change. Despite countless studies by scientists from around the world and agreement among 98 per cent of the world's climate scientists and most of the world's scientific academies and societies that greenhouse gas emissions are causing the Earth's

average temperature to rise, not to mention the facts staring us in the face – increased frequency of extreme weather conditions, rising sea levels, melting ice caps and glaciers – some politicians in the U.S. continue to reject the science and argue that we must proceed with business as usual.

Virginia's Republican attorney general, Kenneth Cuccinelli, has been spending taxpayer dollars attacking climate scientists at the University of Virginia and is suing the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency over its ruling that carbon dioxide and other global warming gases are a threat to human health and welfare.

Believe Planet Is 6,000-years-old

Many Republicans, some of whom also reject the science of evolution and believe the Earth was created 6,000 years ago and humans and dinosaurs walked together, have been following his lead.

Meanwhile a fifth investigation into the so-called "climategate" brouhaha, this one led by Republicans in response to a request from one of their own, Sen. James Inhofe of Oklahoma, has again found no "evidence to question the ethics of our scientists or raise doubts about [the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's] understanding of climate change science."

In Canada, our government has cut funding for climate research, rejected or ignored scientific studies showing environmental damage from the tars sands, and been accused of "muzzling" scientists.

We can take some comfort that, according to a recent poll, 80 per cent of Canadians believe in the science behind climate change, compared to only 58 per cent of U.S. citizens.

Science isn't perfect, and it can be used for destructive as well as beneficial purposes. But it's the best tool we have for analyzing and understanding our world and the impact of our actions on the environment of which we are a part. If our leaders reject science, we really are in trouble.