

# DEFROSTING PUBLIC SCIENCE

**A survey report** on federal government efforts  
to reverse the effects of The Big Chill



The Professional Institute  
of the Public Service  
of Canada

## Introduction

In 2013, following numerous news reports that federal scientists were prevented by the Harper government from speaking publicly about their work, the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada (PIPSC) hired Environics Research to survey its science members (the majority of federal scientists) on the scale and impact of so-called “muzzling” and political interference in their work. The results were featured in a report, *The Big Chill*,<sup>1</sup> and included the staggering finding that nearly 9 out of 10 respondents did not believe they could speak freely to the media about their scientific work.

As the title of the report suggested, a “chill” had settled on federal public scientists due to the communications policies of the Harper government. The report’s findings made national news, were quoted in the House of Commons and made the muzzling of federal scientists a major political issue of the 2015 federal election.

In the spring of 2017, PIPSC launched a new survey of science members with the purpose of measuring the Trudeau government’s progress in reversing the effects of the Big Chill reported in 2013. Between May 29 and June 27, 2017, invitations to participate in an online survey were sent to 16,377 members, of which 3,025 (18.5%) participated. The survey was again conducted for PIPSC by Environics Research and its results are considered accurate (+ or - 1.8%) 19 times out of 20.

This report compares data from 2013 to our members’ views almost two years into the Trudeau government’s mandate. To maximize comparability, most of the survey questions were the same in 2013 and 2017.

## Climate Chill and Muzzling

On November 6, 2015, the new Minister of Innovation, Science and Economic Development, Navdeep Bains, released a statement declaring federal government scientists free to speak to the media about their work.<sup>2</sup> Shortly afterwards, the new Liberal government announced departmental policies and procedures would be revised to reflect this change.<sup>3</sup> A few months later, the Communications Policy of the Government of Canada, introduced under the Harper government, was rescinded.<sup>4</sup> Though these announcements were well received by the Public Science community, the impacts of the much-anticipated changes remained cloudy at the departmental level.<sup>5</sup>

*“Things were slow to get flowing. Yes, the government changed its communications policy, but nobody seemed to know about it.” – Debi Daviau, PIPSC President*

A year later, in December 2016, PIPSC reached tentative collective agreements with the Treasury Board Secretariat of Canada that included clauses recognizing the right of federal scientists to speak about their research and science. The agreements also required that federal departments with 10 or more scientists create and integrate Scientific Integrity policies.

Have these major changes and announcements had an impact on the ability of federal scientists to speak freely about their science?

Compared to 2013, when 90% of respondents said they could not speak freely to the media, in 2017, 53% of survey respondents said they could not speak freely.<sup>6</sup> While this represents a marked improvement, it must be noted that half of government scientists still do not believe they can speak

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1 *The Big Chill: Silencing Public Interest Science*, The Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada (PIPSC), October 2013, <https://www.pipsc.ca/portal/page/portal/website/issues/science/bigchill>

2 Scientists, ministers get green light to speak under Trudeau, Pauline Dakin, CBC News, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/scientists-ministers-get-green-light-to-speak-under-trudeau-1.3307679>

3 Muzzled Canadian scientists now free to speak with media, Robin Levinson King, *The Toronto Star*, November 6, 2015, <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2015/11/06/muzzles-removed-for-federal-scientists-at-department-of-fisheries-and-oceans.html>

4 Rescinded [2016-05-11] – Communications Policy of the Government of Canada, *Policies, Directives, Standards & Guidelines*, Treasury Board Secretariat, <https://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pol/doc-eng.aspx?id=12316&section=HTML>

5 Unmuzzled government scientists are ready to talk, Shannon Proudfoot, *Maclean's*, January 2017, <http://www.macleans.ca/society/unmuzzled-government-scientists-ready-to-discuss-a-decade-of-work/>

6 Base: All 2017 Science Survey Respondents – excluding “Not Applicable” (N/A) results

freely to the media about their work even though the political landscape has changed, the communication policies have changed, and collective agreement language protecting their right to speak now exists. As one respondent remarked:

*“It is easier for scientists to speak to the media, and at a political level there is support for evidence-based decision-making, but it is not clear this concept has fully penetrated the culture and practices within the organization.”*

To better illustrate this concern, in 2013, *The Big Chill* revealed that 86% of respondents feared censorship or retaliation from their department or agency if they spoke out about a departmental decision or action that, based on their scientific knowledge, could bring harm to the public interest. In 2017, when asked the same question, 73% of respondents said they would not be able to do so without fear of censorship or retaliation— a mere 13% drop.

What about access to the news media? Are federal scientists still being prevented from answering questions from the media?

In 2013, 37% of respondents indicated they had been prevented from answering a question from the public or the media by public relations personnel or management. Since 2015, one in five respondents (20%) say they received a question from the public or media that they had the expertise to answer but were prevented from doing so by public relations staff or management. As another respondent commented:

*“At the mid-management level, things continue as if there had never been an election. I have a Director who seems to not have gotten the memo and I am told I am not paid to have opinions and cannot speak in public.”*

What about sharing findings with the public?

In 2013, *The Big Chill* reported that nearly three-quarters (74%) of respondents believed the sharing of science findings was too restrictive. In 2017, almost half (47%) believed the sharing of government science findings with the public has

become *less* restrictive since the last election. The situation has not improved across all science-based departments and agencies, however, as more than one in four respondents (29%) said they have seen no change in restrictions to sharing government science findings. As one respondent wrote:

*“There is still a cadre of managers who were very comfortable with the tight rules under the Harper government and are clinging to them.”*

In short, the Liberal government’s record so far in addressing federal scientists’ concerns about muzzling, promoting their right to speak, and sharing scientific findings can be described as mixed. Anecdotally, some respondents attribute this slow rate of change to managers who are misinformed or even unwilling to change.

## Political Interference and Impacts on Policy

Federal scientists play a major role in evaluating the safety of Canadians’ food, water, drugs, industrial chemicals, and many other products.

In 2013, PIPSC’s survey found that 50% of respondents were aware of actual cases where the health and safety of Canadians or our environmental sustainability had been compromised by political interference. By contrast, the 2017 survey results show that respondents believe the situation has somewhat improved under the Liberal government. Most respondents (77%) said that, since October 2015, they were not aware of instances where the health and safety of Canadians has been compromised because of political interference. And the percentage of scientists who said they are aware of such instances has diminished to 23% compared to 2013.

Our 2013 survey also revealed that 71% of those who responded agreed that political interference had compromised the use of scientific evidence in government decision-making. In 2017, 40% of respondents still believe political interference is an obstacle to the use of scientific evidence in important government decisions such as laws, policies and programs. As one respondent commented:

*“There is too much politics affecting decision making and research direction.”*

*The Big Chill* also revealed that about half of respondents (48%) were aware of cases where their department/agency suppressed or declined to release information, which led to incomplete or inaccurate impressions. The results of the new survey show that these percentages have shifted among respondents, where those who are aware of such instances have decreased by 20% since the Liberals took power. The results, however, also tell us that close to one-third (29%) of respondents have witnessed this type of political interference in their department or agency since 2015. As one of the respondents commented:

*“Transparency is lacking, we have issues with delivering science messages which are being altered before reaching the public.”*

### Whistle-blowing

Our new data still paints a worrisome portrait of fear of reprisal and censorship among federal scientists. Accordingly, the vast majority of respondents (89%) also believe, as they did in 2013, that Canadian taxpayers would be better served if the federal government strengthened its whistle-blower protection.

Fear of reprisal remains one of the main obstacles to whistle-blowing and current law fails to address this concern. While whistle-blowing is clearly a service to the public, it happens only rarely, when a public servant has tried every other avenue to resolve a significant concern. Sadly, for too many scientists, it has also meant sacrificing their career for the sake of the public interest.

### Conclusion

The Trudeau government has shown itself willing to unmuzzle federal scientists, make science more available to the public, and promote scientific evidence in its decision-making. At a time when these values are under threat in the United States, it is more important than ever that Canada lead by example and promote federal science in the public interest.

While some results in this report show clear signs of progress being made in these respects, much work remains to be done. Why, for example, do 53% of our science respondents still believe they cannot speak freely about their work? Why do nearly one in three claim to have witnessed political interference in their department, or 73% still fear censorship and retaliation if they speak out?

The message seems clear: undoing 10 years of damage to federal science will take more than a change of government, hopeful mandate letters, or even collective agreement provisions protecting the right of federal scientists to speak. Nor should the impact of accumulated funding cuts over many years be overlooked. (A forthcoming report on progress in reversing cuts to federal science will update the data recorded in our 2014 report, *Vanishing Science*.)<sup>7</sup>

Real progress will require more deliberate, concrete action by both government and the public service.

To this end, the Institute recommends the following actions:

- 1. Foster and promote the right to speak** of scientists through joint staff and management training sessions in all science-based departments and agencies (SBDAs);
- 2. Enhance whistle-blowing protections** for federal scientists;
- 3. Review communications policies in all SBDAs** to ensure the right to speak is clearly included, and provide annual reminders of the policies to both staff and management;
- 4. Continue to prioritize the development and implementation of scientific integrity policies** within SBDAs;
- 5. Engage the Chief Science Advisor** in developing concrete steps for government to include public science evidence in decision-making;
- 6. Embrace a public science culture** and evidence-based approach in upper management within SBDAs;
- 7. Promote public access and ongoing dialogue** by holding open houses showcasing the work of federal scientists.

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<sup>7</sup> *Vanishing Science: The Disappearance of Canadian Public Interest Science*, The Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada (PIPSC), February 2014, <http://www.pipsc.ca/portal/page/portal/website/issues/science/vanishingscience>

## Survey Questions and Responses

### Climate Chill and Muzzling (since October 2015)

I am allowed to speak freely and without constraints to the media about work I do at my Department/Agency.

2013: **90% No** (10% Yes)

2017: **53% No** (47% Yes)

If I knew of a departmental decision or action that, based on my scientific knowledge, could bring harm to the public interest, including to health, safety, or the environment, I could share these concerns with the public or media without fear of censorship or retaliation.

2013: **86% Disagree** (14% Agree)

2017: **73% Disagree** (27% Agree)

I have received a question from the public or media that I have the expertise to answer, but have been prevented from doing so by public relations or by management.

2013: **37% Yes** (63% No)

2017: **20% Yes** (80% No)

Since October 2015, do you feel that the sharing of government science findings with the Canadian public has become more restricted or less restricted?

2013: **74% Too Restricted**

(3% Too Unrestricted, 18% No Change)

2017: 6% More Restricted

**(47% Less Restricted, 29% No Change)**

### Political Interference and Impacts on Policy (since October 2015)

I am aware of cases where the health and safety of Canadians (or environmental sustainability) has been compromised because of political interference with our scientific work.

2013: **50% Agree** (49% Disagree)

2017: **23% Agree** (77% Disagree)

Our ability to develop policy, law, and programs that are based on scientific evidence and facts has been compromised by political interference.

2013: **71% Agree** (29% Disagree)

2017: **40% Agree** (60% Disagree)

I am aware of cases where my department or agency has suppressed or declined to release information, and where this led to incomplete, inaccurate, or misleading impressions by the public, regulated industry, the media and/or government officials since.

2013: **48% Agree** (52% Disagree)

2017: **29% Agree** (71% Disagree)

### Whistle-blowing (since October 2015)

The public would be better served if the federal government strengthened its “whistleblower” protection for public service employees?

2013: **88% Agree** (12% Disagree)

2017: **89% Agree** (11% Disagree)



*“I will expect you to work with your colleagues ... to deliver on your top priorities: ... ensure that government science is fully available to the public, that scientists are able to speak freely about their work, and that scientific analyses are considered when the government makes decisions.”*

**Prime Minister Justin Trudeau,**  
Mandate letter to the Minister of Science,  
November 12, 2015

