Knowing ourselves

The concept of Canadian Studies owes a great deal to Thomas Symons and his landmark 1975 report To Know Ourselves. In that report, Symons detailed the degree to which Canadian post-secondary institutions had previously failed to integrate and promote curricula and research on their own country. In subsequent decades, especially among the newer universities, like York University, institutions embraced the project, creating research centres and offering multidisciplinary degree programs under the rubric of “Canadian Studies.” The Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies is one of the products of that enthusiasm, benefiting from an endowment provided by the Canadian and Ontario governments and private benefactors who wished to recognize the legacy of former Ontario premier John Robarts.

BY COLIN COATES

Colin Coates is an associate professor of Canadian Studies at Glendon College, York University and was the director of the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies from 2011 to 2015.

Editorial: The politics of evidence

This issue of Canada Watch is the outcome of collaboration between the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies and the Politics of Evidence (POE) Working Group, an inter-university collaboration convened by Professor Natasha Myers. This working group brings together over 40 faculty and graduate student members from York University, the University of Toronto, Ryerson University, and other universities across the country. It was formed to “raise public awareness and to challenge existing barriers to research and the dissemination of research findings, whether such barriers come from the public or private sectors. By interrogating the uses and abuses of evidence, we seek to highlight where science and technology in Canada intersect with issues of social and environmental justice.” You can read more about POE resources and activities on our website at https://politicsofevidence.wordpress.com.

BY JODY BERLAND

Jody Berland is professor in the Department of Humanities and senior faculty associate of the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies, York University. She is author of North of Empire: Essays on the Cultural Technologies of Space (2009), co-editor of Cultures of Militarization and other books, and co-editor of TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies (www.yorku.ca/topia).

While science is rarely at the forefront of political controversy, the current government has acted strategically to silence government scientists and to render their findings invisible. As detailed by articles in this issue, the Harper government has cancelled the long-form census, eliminated the office of the National Science Advisor, closed libraries, testing labs, parliamentary offices, and research programs, and interfered with researchers’ communication with the public. When research is veiled or cherry-picked by government offices, the policy implications of the research cannot be properly addressed. Further, some advocates of policy outcomes based on scientific research are targeted as hostile to the national interest. This practice is consistent with a notable and unprecedented centralization of power in the Prime Minister’s Office.

Scholars in Science and Technology Studies and in the history and anthropology of science and social science have shown that “science” and its evidentiary rules have evolved through...

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We seek to highlight where science and technology in Canada intersect with issues of social and environmental justice.
disqualify them from charitable status, you know the country is facing a serious problem that concerns not just science, but democracy itself.

These practices of closure and surveillance don’t just affect current policy discussions or outcomes. They also threaten future research and where it points us. Whether documenting fish, drilling, water, oil leaks, or the treatment of Indigenous peoples, many of these materials are lost forever. Indeed, “evidence” is not confined to the world of natural resources, and “libricide” is not confined to the collections of the Departments of Science or Fisheries and Oceans. The long-gun registry was not just terminated; its records were destroyed. The long-form census gathered statistical evidence of changing family, economic, rural–urban, and social patterns that was essential to making social policy responsive to people’s actual needs. When it was cancelled, the director of Statistics Canada resigned from public service. We call this a “politics of evidence” in part because it harms some communities more than others. This government will not order an inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women, formulate a response to the Truth and Reconciliation Report, address the rights of refugees, or tell the truth about the Temporary Foreign Workers Program and its impact on unemployment and workers’ rights, because, as the prime minister so cogently put it, “we don’t do sociology.” Notably, the United Nations Human Rights Committee just released a report highly critical of the Canadian government for its failure to address these urgent issues (CBC News 2015).

Our ability to know what is happening in our country and to base reasonable policy on this knowledge is being shattered. Scientists and researchers must be allowed to learn about the country and communicate their knowledge with the public. Where evidence is suppressed, public knowledge and awareness are also suppressed, curtailing the will for change. As the contributors to this issue of Canada Watch show, missing evidence has significant implications for the safety and security of everyone, whether it involves social, scientific, medical, environmental, women’s, LGBT and Indigenous peoples’ problems and histories, or the future of the planet.

In the following articles, researchers investigate the records and implications of the government’s war on science in the contexts of Canada’s fisheries (Sutherland) and the selective use of evidence to form forestry policies (Myers); the development of health policies in relation to endocrinology disrupters (Murphy), LGBT health policy (Mulé), and Indigenous health in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (Elliott); the relation of science research to public and political culture (Bazely); missing and murdered Indigenous women (Dalton); the evisceration of Canada’s National Library and Archives (Murphy); the cancellation of the long-form census (Eichler); the collapse of Canada’s reputation in the international world of science (Pinto); and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (Dalton). For more details on these stories and larger issues of Canadian science, policy, and research, please consult the “Bibliography for Further Reading,” provided by the contributors.

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WORKS CITED


