

Canada Watch

PRACTICAL AND AUTHORITATIVE ANALYSIS OF KEY NATIONAL ISSUES

DIRECTOR'S INTRODUCTION

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,

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.

institutions embraced the project, creating research centres and offering multi-

disciplinary 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.

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EDITORIAL

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' communi-

cation 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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complex social, political, economic, technological, and institutional contexts. Science has never been pure, or purely objective; it has always been closely intertwined with social and cultural practices and priorities. The Canadian government's direct interference with scientific and social evidence has made explicit to wider publics that political power can shape what and how (and how much) we know, whether by governments seeking to secure a preferred policy or corporations seeking to secure profits. The current government's unprecedented "silencing of the labs" (*The fifth estate* 2014) and its larger assault on public science and evidence-based policy have brought increasing condemnation from scientists around the world.

Since 2006, according to many reports, the Harper government has made concerted efforts to control or prevent the free flow of scientific information across Canada, particularly when that information highlights the undesirable consequences of resource development. Carol Linnitt notes that, "The free flow of information is controlled in two ways: through the muzzling of scientists who might communicate scientific information, and through the elimination of research programs that might participate in the creation of scientific information or evidence" (Linnitt 2013). In 2008, the position of National Science Advisor was eliminated. In 2010, the government cancelled the long-form census and began to close libraries, destroy archives, and shutter research facilities. The 2012 omnibus budget bill, Bill C-38, cut funding to or dismantled the following environmental bodies or pieces of legislation: the *Canadian Environmental Assessment Act*, the Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency, the *Canadian Environmental Protection Act*, the *Kyoto Protocol Implementation Act*, the *Fisheries Act*, the *Navigable Waters Protection Act*, the *Energy Board Act*, the *Species at Risk Act*; the *Parks Canada Agency Act*, the *Canada*

[W]e seek to highlight where science and technology in Canada intersect with issues of social and environmental justice.

ian Oil and Gas Operations Act, the *Coasting Trade Act*, the *Nuclear Safety Control Act*, and the *Canada Seeds Act*. The Prime Minister's Office also prohibited government scientists from speaking to the media, shadowed and censored Environment Canada scientists in the course of their work, terminated environmental assessment stations in the North, purged scientific libraries, and closed hundreds of labs and water testing facilities across the country.

Records on socially controversial policies such as residential schools, gun ownership, and foreign workers have either disappeared or failed to register in political solutions. When government acts to delink policy from evidence, it denies its citizens not only the right to know what scientists know but also the right to engage in informed public discussions about issues that affect us. Another result of this government's hostility to evidence (when it does not support its policy goals) has been the emergence of a countermovement dedicated to bringing scientific controversies and their political implications into the public eye, spearheaded by organizations such as Evidence for Democracy and Our Right to Know.

Scientists and journalists opposing these trends have accused Harper's Conservative government of "libricide" for closing some of the world's most important fishery, ocean, and environmental libraries (see *TheStar.com* 2014; Doctorow 2014; *Climate Science Watch* 2014; Linnitt 2013). When the National Science Advisor's office was dissolved, its libraries were moved into Information Management and Technology Services (IMTS), and five out of seven of these important libraries were closed. In some cases, IMTS invited the public to enter and scavenge the shelves

before shipping out what was left to remote sites. In other cases, witnesses saw collections being moved to dumpsters (Nikiforuk 2013b). Canada was a world leader in research on sustainable fisheries and oceans. We possessed world-class laboratories and libraries with some of the finest environmental science and freshwater book collections in the world (Nikiforuk 2013a). Many of these are now gone.

Scientists and advocacy groups have described a growing incongruity between the government's single-minded dedication to profitable and efficient natural resource extraction, and the known, scientifically proven risks of environmental degradation such as polluted waters, climate change, and resource depletion arising from such extraction. This incongruity is increasingly evident with the unchecked growth of the oil sands, fracking, overfishing, factory farming, and the movement of bitumen by land and sea. The collection and public dissemination of research related to these issues is giving way to the enactment of strategies dedicated to suppressing such knowledge. While cutting programs like water testing, wastewater surveys, and emissions monitoring programs (Linnitt 2013), ostensibly for budgetary reasons, the government has dedicated targeted funds to the accumulation of punitive evidence, like investigating the public communication and charitable status of environmental non-profits. When government officials suggest that public scientists or environmental groups questioning pipelines or oil sands are hostile to the nation's interests and even "terrorists" subject to potential counterinsurgency tactics, and when the Canada Revenue Agency threatens to audit bird watchers (and many other groups) in case public statements about the natural environment


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, miss-

ing 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 disruptors (Murphy), LGBT health policy (Mulé), and Indigenous health in Vancouver's Downtown East Side (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 (Murray); 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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