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Research

Question by

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

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THE SENATE

Wednesday, February 29, 2012

[Translation]

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

RESEARCH

Hon. Claudette Tardif (Deputy Leader of the Opposition): My question is for the Leader of the Government in the Senate. In an open letter to the Prime Minister dated February 16, scientists belonging to six Canadian professional organizations pointed out that, since coming to power in 2006, the government has erected a veritable wall between Canadians and publicly funded researchers.

The letter speaks about how, since 2006, communications about the research findings of federal scientists have turned into public relations efforts.

I would like to quote a passage from that letter.

Despite promises that your majority government would follow principles of accountability and transparency, federal scientists in Canada are still not allowed to speak to reporters without the “consent” of media relations officers. Delays in obtaining interviews are often unacceptable and journalists are routinely denied interviews. Increasingly, journalists have simply given up trying to access federal scientists, while scientists at work in federal departments are under undue pressure in an atmosphere dominated by political messaging.

Publicly funded research must not serve political interests, but the interests of science and public debate, which require the free flow of information.

Why has the government implemented a policy that censors these researchers and is criticized by scientists and the media alike?

[English]

Hon. Marjory LeBreton (Leader of the Government): Honourable senators, that quote reminds me of what my father used to say to me: Believe 98 per cent of what you see and only 4 per cent of what you read.

The fact of the matter is, honourable senators — and I have answered this question before — ministers in this government are the primary spokesperson for their departments, as was the case in the previous government. Scientists share research material and publish research findings, and scientists working for the Government of Canada grant hundreds of interviews to discuss their work. For instance, Fisheries and Oceans scientists responded to approximately 380 science-based media calls annually. Last year, Environment Canada officials completed over 1,200 media interviews, including more than 325 interviews with departmental scientists. Therefore, I believe the premise of the honourable senator’s question and the accusations she makes are quite false.

[Translation]

Senator Tardif: Honourable senators, I am not the one making these accusations. This letter addressed to the Prime Minister was sent and signed by the president of the Association des communicateurs scientifiques du Québec, the president of the Association science et bien commun, the president of Canadian Journalists for Free Expression, the president of the Canadian Science Writers’ Association, the executive director of the World Federation of Science Journalists and the president of The Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada. These six professional organizations are calling for a review of Canada’s communication policy.

When will the government act with the transparency it promised and review its communication policy in order to restore freedom of expression to Canadian federal researchers?

[English]

Senator LeBreton: Honourable senators, I wonder if this same group sent a similar letter to the previous government because ministers in the government are primarily responsible for answering for their departments and that has not changed. This has been the case with our government; it was the case with the short-lived Martin government; and it was the case with the Chrétien government.

To these people who signed the letter, I would simply say they should check their facts because they are clearly misinformed and the numbers I put on the record speak for themselves. There have been many interviews, and scientists have had direct access to the media, so perhaps they should check their facts before writing letters asking for a change in policy.