



DEBATES OF THE SENATE

2nd SESSION • 41st PARLIAMENT • VOLUME 149 • NUMBER 10

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Research and Development

Questions by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Thursday, October 31, 2013

THE SENATE

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[*Translation*]

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

Hon. Claudette Tardif: Mr. Leader, these days it is not easy to be a federal government scientist. That is the unequivocal message of a survey of scientists commissioned by the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada in order to determine the extent to which scientists are being affected by muzzling and political interference.

Here are some of the disturbing results: 90 per cent of scientists believe they cannot speak to the media about their work; 37 per cent said that they have been prevented from responding to questions from the public and the media in the past five years; 86 per cent believe that if they spoke openly or spoke out about a departmental decision that could harm health or the environment, they would face retaliation or censure. The most serious finding of all is that almost 25 per cent of scientists reported that they had been asked to exclude or alter information for reasons that had nothing to do with science.

How can Canadians have confidence that their government really cares about their health and safety when the government systematically leaves science out of the decision-making process, for partisan reasons?

Hon. Claude Carignan (Leader of the Government): The honourable senator knows that our government has made unprecedented investments in science and technology and that ministers are the primary spokespersons for government departments. Researchers and government experts are always willing to share the results of their research with Canadians.

Senator Tardif: Many examples of scientists who feel muzzled by this government have been reported in recent years. The Information Commissioner even launched an investigation earlier this year into this serious problem. The results show that the

situation is even more serious than we thought. Federal scientists are carrying out their duties in a real climate of fear.

One survey respondent had this to say:

Senior management expects public servants to embrace the fiction that we are here to fearlessly provide good advice to decision-makers. The facts are that even expressing mild concern with a chosen plan of action can lead to a harsh reaction.

How can the government guarantee Canadians that its decisions are based on reliable, complete information when this climate of fear is so pervasive within the public service?

Senator Carignan: Senator, I do not wish to comment on isolated cases, but I do wish to reiterate that government researchers and experts are always willing to share the results of their research with Canadians.

[*English*]

Senator Mercer: Once approved by the PMO.

[*Translation*]

Senator Tardif: I was not talking about isolated cases. More than 4,000 scientists responded to this survey and 86 per cent of them indicated that they were afraid, that they could not justify the information they were being asked to provide and that they felt uncomfortable doing so.

An Hon. Senator: Scandalous.

Senator Tardif: I think they are living in fear, which is a serious problem.

Senator Carignan: When I was talking about the isolated case, I was referring to the situation you mentioned, of the anonymous person who filled out an anonymous survey.