

Canadian science needs non-partisan alliances to weather political winds of change

Politicized science policy can suffer, alongside politicians, a decline in public trust.



Milton Friesen

Science

Today, Canada's scientific community and its supporting bureaucracies seem to feel the political sun is shining on them. But political seasons change. What happens if political clouds and cold winds return?

For politicians, civil servants, and scientists who emerged from the recent Canadian Science Policy Conference (CSPC) held Nov. 7 to 9 in Ottawa, one key strategic preoccupation should be the defence of long, steady investment in scientific capacity building against changing political seasons.

To make progress on our many collective problems from disease to wasted energy to violence, we need steady and wise fundamental research investments. Attending and being a speaker at CSPC made clear to me that science communication hasn't escaped the hype and spin cycles of contemporary media.

When deciding what to say publically, all institutions have trouble choosing what is inconveniently true and what is conveniently less true. Political expediency. Pleasing stakeholders. Appeasing funders. Avoiding public scrutiny. The cultural question for science is whether to play in the moment or to invest in a longer-term view of

building trust and confidence across political changes.

In recent history, science has been complicit in significant misjudgements and errors ranging from tainted blood in the 1980s, debates about power lines and health, or cod stock management failure. The shadow of those errors fell on science even when poor implementation or bureaucratic arrogance caused the failure.

For scientific knowledge to improve our common lives, those who engage in, write about, and make decisions regarding the pursuit of natural, social, and human knowledge must commit to clarity and truthfulness—a willingness to share both good and bad news. This includes a commitment to explaining what we do and don't know, or where we've been wrong.

Media often exaggerate scientific gains—over-promising and under-delivering. This leads to eroded trust when something truly interesting or important happens; citizens default to

lower trust in our institutionally suspicious culture. And interest groups, lobbyists and politicians often turn scientific pursuits into political advantage as they lean on scientific credibility to support their cause.

The feeling at the conference was that Canada was making gains through appointments like chief scientist Dr. Mona Nemer and more science advisers. Well and good. Let's use the opportunity to build stronger, non-partisan alliances. While the actual practice of "chemicals in test tubes" is the domain of trained scientists, the enterprise of science is most assuredly an "us." We're a diverse and often opinionated lot that needs to engage with the enterprise maturely and prudently.

The participants and speakers at the CSPC are a bright, talented, hopeful, and diverse lot. We need to steward their momentum and optimism in ways that aren't politically expedient in the short term and fail to buttress this part of our public square against improper interference.

One way forward is to build lateral, non-partisan networks by reviewing the science policy and research landscape to find institutions, organizations, and groups not currently engaged. Getting and keeping political affections can be time-consuming, but there must also be time to weave in more than the usual suspects. Local communities, arts, culture, and even religious groups have

strong grassroots networks that can help identify important social changes and solve new challenges. We must learn to grow more of this "citizen science."

Federal Minister of Science and Sport Kirsty Duncan spoke at the CSPC gala dinner, offering her take on how she's enlarged that net of engagement and supported those who need more recognition. Nothing should be taken away from those efforts. The temptation to avoid, however, is taking political advantage that fails to weather regime change. The real test for any Canadian science policy gains will come after a change in political masters. Politicized science policy can suffer, alongside politicians, a decline in public trust.

It may be that localized science, well supported from federal and provincial levels, will, like other civil society institutions, buffer us against unwanted political intrusions. If we can build that capacity, engaging scientists and administrators to be clear and direct ambassadors of how science can support our common future, then we'll have gained more than just interesting and valuable new insight. We'll have re-woven the Canadian civil fabric in places where it has worn too thin to protect us when cold winds blow.

Milton Friesen is the Social Cities program director at think tank Cardus. He was a presenter at CSPC 2018.

The Hill Times