

# Gagging Scientists and Academics, Eliminating Critical Debate: Britain's Proposed Rules

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*Has the British political establishment had an atrophying episode on the science front? Suggestions that this might be the case came last week when there were suggestions that a gag of Britain's scientists might be in the works. The Cabinet Office had busied itself with proposals in February that, if implemented, would prevent organisations from using taxpayer funds to lobby parliamentarians.*

Initially, the ban would have covered academics, effectively eliminating them from the public debates on such matters as transport, genetic modification, stem-cell research, climate change and energy.[1] It would also effectively siphon and control the award of grant money in tighter fashion.

The point would be to target the logical conclusions to be drawn from certain research that might, just might, lead to a particular policy change. The more relevant the research, the greater the need to keep matters shut. The perverse outcome of such a move would be to effectively open the field to various lobby groups keen on skewing the angle and controlling the discussion.

As Bob Ward, policy and communications director at the Centre for Climate Change Economics and Policy argued, such changes would "make it much more difficult for independent university experts to advise ministers and civil servants, and hence make it easier for lobbyists, companies and campaign groups to divert policies towards vested interests instead." [2] In such an abhorrent vacuum, the disgusting will thrive.

This prompted a storm of protest from a group that all too readily capitulates in the face of government bullying. Up to 20,000 academics signed a petition taking aim at the policies, and asking for an exemption. The confusion was compounded by a blurring between the lines of lobbying and scientific research.

On Tuesday, Lord Bridges of Headley, parliamentary secretary for the Cabinet Office, announced that exemptions would be put in place with respect to national academies, research councils and the Higher Funding Council for England.

As astronomer royal Martin Rees observed, the delay in making the exemption was baffling. "This clarification is welcome but should have come sooner. It's regrettable that it was preceded by months of confusion and ambiguity that generated needless anxiety, ill-feeling and time-wasting." In the cautious words of Sarah Main of the Campaign for Science and Engineering, "We now need to the detail right to make sure this solution works for all government and all of science."

Gagging the loquacious scientist has been the business of authorities for centuries.

**Galileo's views on celestial matters were shut up** because of attitudes distinctly at odds with the Church (Less known is the fact that he was not quite as radical in knowledge as others make out.)



Modern democracies have certainly been twitchy on the subject of allowing scientists to speak readily. They are the moral irritants who wish to see the record kept accurate. In 2013, Canadian scientists were given a good old dressing down in cases where they apparently spoke without ministerial approval.[3] The tendencies were already being observed as far back as 2008.

The measure was motivated in large part by the Harper government's persistent love affair with extractive industries, though its consequences were far reaching in their absurd applications.

Portrait of GalileoCanadian biologist Steve Campana gave an example of how extensive the ban was in a discussion with CBC News. Something as seemingly inoffensive as discussing techniques behind aging a lobster, a point applicable to the fishing industry, could not see the light of public discussion.[4]

Another scientist in Canada's employ, pseudonymously named Janet, told *Motherboard* about the screening conducted by a "media officer" of her work.[5] These officers were naturally faceless creatures, operating a general account, and filtering, editing and adjusting information at will.

There were "a list of 'hot-button' issues that can't be mentioned, like climate change, or the oil sands." This went so far as to urge the particular scientist in question to refrain from using specific phrases or any matter linking the findings to an industry.

The effect of such none-too-subtle gagging (or muzzling, as it has been termed) was to effectively reduce such scientists as Janet to a state of unwarranted imbecility. Ignorance had to be feigned for the greater government good. "They've told me: 'Say you don't know

the answer to that question,' even if I do. They make me look like an idiot."

The freshly-elected Trudeau government has repealed the measure. Navdeep Bains, Canada's Minister of Innovation, Science and Economic Development, made the point that "government scientists and experts will be able to speak freely about their work to the media and the public. We are working to make government science fully available to the public and will ensure that scientific analyses are considered in decision making." [6]

Good for Trudeau and his new government, but the recent behaviour in Britain on matters of lobbies remains a potential threat to broader discussions of science. Even in bastions of democratic discussion, enemies of enlightenment can thrive with viral menace.

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## Notes

- [1] <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2016/apr/19/ministers-back-down-on-rule-gagging-scientists>
- [2] <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2016/feb/20/scientists-attack-muzzling-government-state-funded-cabinet-office>
- [3] <http://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/when-science-goes-silent/>
- [4] <http://www.iflscience.com/editors-blog/canadian-federal-scientists-can-now-speak-freely-media>
- [5] <http://motherboard.vice.com/read/the-fight-to-unmuzzle-canadas-scientists>
- [6] <http://www.iflscience.com/editors-blog/canadian-federal-scientists-can-now-speak-freely-media>

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