



# Scientific Freedom of Speech: The Changing Tide

Tom Price

In the United States and Australia, scientists are being given more freedom to conduct and disseminate their work.

**T**he day after his inauguration, U.S. President Barack Obama began taking steps toward establishing a climate of scientific openness in his administration. He instructed all federal agencies to adopt a presumption in favor of disclosure when responding to requests for government documents under the Freedom of Information Act. In addition, he said, agencies should establish procedures for making information public even in the absence of requests.

Two days later, his Environmental Protection Agency administrator, Lisa Jackson, sent a memo to all EPA employees in which she pledged that agency decisions would be based on “rigorous adherence to the best available science.” Then, in early February, Obama limited the Office of Budget and Management’s power to override experts’ findings in government rulemaking.

“Promoting science isn’t just about providing resources,” Obama said when he

introduced his choices for top administration science positions in December. “It’s about protecting free and open inquiry.”

Congress, also, promised action on the issue. The top priority in the House Science and Technology Committee’s oversight plan for 2009-10 is “restoring public confidence in the integrity of public science.”

Scientific and civil liberties organizations described these developments as good first steps. However, “there’s a lot of work still to do,” said Tim Donaghy, an analyst in the Union of Concerned Scientists’ Scientific Integrity Program.

“In democracies, there are all sorts of subtle and not-so-subtle ways of ensuring that the truth doesn’t come out about particular issues,” noted Kenneth Baldwin, deputy director of the Australian National University’s Research School of Physical Sciences and Engineering.

As in the United States, in Australia, a more liberal government recently took

power and embraced scientific openness as a way of distinguishing itself from its predecessor. The Australian Labor Party, led by current Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, ousted a governing coalition led by Liberal Prime Minister John Howard in December 2007. Labor quickly moved to set itself up as the friend of scientific speech.

“We have seen the former government stifle intellectual debate and suppress ideas,” said Kim Carr, Australia’s minister for innovation, industry, science and research, during a meeting with scientists early last year. Government scientists must be able to speak publicly about their findings and the implications of their research, he said. “Unless scientists can speak in their areas of expertise,” he added, “the progress of human knowledge will be impeded.”

Carr’s Labor government went on to promulgate a series of “charters” for Australia’s public research organizations

based on a first principle that “freedom produces the best research.”

The charters guarantee organizations the right to function without political interference. They also call for scientists to engage in scientific debate and disseminate their findings widely. When an agency issues a public statement, the charters say, it should reveal any diversity of opinion that exists within the organization, rather than limiting publication to findings that support government policy.

While government scientists should contribute their scientific knowledge to government policy-making and public debate, the charters say, those scientists should not comment publicly on government or opposition party policies unless they disclose that they are speaking as private citizens rather than government employees.

In the United States, the Bush administration expanded the classification of documents and restricted public access to information deemed “sensitive but unclassified” in the wake of 9/11. The administration’s own independent inspectors general uncovered incidents of censorship and distortion. Some prominent government scientists stepped forward with their own stories.

For example, James Hansen, director of NASA’s Goddard Institute for Space Studies since 1981 and a leading climate change expert, said climate scientists were discouraged from making their findings public. He said NASA public affairs officers were ordered to review his lectures, papers, Internet postings and responses to journalists’ requests for interviews. He was told that his supervisors could take his place in news interviews and that he would face “dire consequences” if he continued to speak out in opposition to administration climate change policies.

In 2005, a whistleblower at the federal Climate Change Science Program publicized documents that showed the Council on Environmental Quality’s chief of staff had altered reports to raise uncertainty about global warming. The executive, Philip Cooney, had previously been a lobbyist for the American Petroleum Institute. After the documents were made public, he left the government to work for Exxon Mobil.

“To make the best decisions, we need free access to unbiased scientific findings and conclusions, because the quality of our decisions is highly dependent upon the science we use to make those decisions,” said Daniel Inouye, former chairman of the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee. “When scientists can present their ideas in a forum unfettered by politics, well-crafted policies usually follow.”

Donaghy said the Union of Concerned Scientists is “cautiously encouraged” by

Obama’s early actions. Similarly, Katherine Rabb, head of the National Coalition Against Censorship’s science program, welcomed Obama’s talk about openness in government science. However, it’s too early to judge the administration’s actions, she added.

However, the quality of Obama’s scientific appointments may suggest reason for optimism. For example, he recently named Harvard physicist John Holdren, a strong advocate for scientific free speech, as White House science advisor, and OSA Honorary Member Steven Chu as the new Secretary of Energy.

“John Holdren should be committed to fulfilling President-elect Obama’s pledge to restore scientific integrity in federal decision-making,” said Francesca Grifo, who heads the concerned scientists’ integrity program. ▲

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*Kenneth Baldwin, deputy director Australian National University’s Research School of Physical Sciences & Engineering*

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