



### *Is Science Being Muzzled in Canada?*

#### **Flashback:**

On April 1, 2004, Dr. Arthur Carty was appointed by former Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin as Canada's first National Science Adviser<sup>1</sup> to provide expert advice on the government's role in matters of science and science policy. At last, a ray of hope, some truth shed on complex issues, a little sanity amidst the political chaos ... alas, governments rise and fall like the turning of the seasons. Less than four years after the National Science Advisor position was created, the Conservative Harper government decided to "discontinue" it, and Dr. Carty retired from public office. Criticism and dismay was expressed by the scientific community, and concerns that Canada's Conservative government was trying to "muzzle" its scientists were raised. But we Canadians are a forgiving lot, and the loss of a scientific voice of reason quickly became a minor bump in the roadway of progress.

#### **Prelude:**

In January, 2011, Dr. Kristi Miller published a paper titled "*Canadian Salmon Genomic Signatures Predict Migration and Spawning Failure in Wild Canadian Salmon*" in the prestigious journal *Science*. In this paper, she points to the possibility that salmon leukemia, caused by a virus, is to blame for the decline of Fraser River sockeye. It is unclear whether this is the same virus which causes plasmacytoid leukemia (commonly known as marine anemia) in farmed Chinook salmon, but the need for further

research is clearly evident. However, marine anemia in salmon is a political hot potato. Suddenly, the Privy Council Office, which supports the Prime Minister's Office, ordered Dr. Miller not to speak to the press. Additionally, the Privy Council Office also prevented a Fisheries Department news release about Miller's study, saying the release "*was not very good, focused on salmon dying and not on the new science aspect*"<sup>2</sup>. The Privy Council Office and the Fisheries Department said Miller was not permitted to discuss her work because of the Cohen Commission, a judicial inquiry created by the Prime Minister to look into declines of the famed Fraser River sockeye salmon.

#### **Back to the Future:**

We are at the Cohen Commission. Prominent and respected scientists are on the stand providing evidence into the decline of sockeye salmon in the Fraser River. Suddenly there is chaos amongst the scientific ranks. One scientist, possibly under stress from being on the stand, begins to spout political propaganda "... *we think that not only will aquaculture continue to increase and be a major source of food on the planet, we think British Columbia will be perfectly positioned to develop that industry here.*"<sup>3</sup> What does this have to do with science and the decline of sockeye salmon? Another refutes his past research, now claiming that the retrovirus he found associated with plasmacytoid leukemia in Chinook salmon (reported in a peer reviewed paper published in *Cancer Research*), and which was tentatively called "leukemia virus", is, in his opinion, not a virus. If this is the case, why did he not inform the scientific community about his new "findings"? Other scientists, faced with the task of revealing the truth as they understand it, lapse into spells of incoherence on the stand. Are we truly that incompetent? When Dr. Miller arrives at the Cohen Commission, she is flanked by large men in dark suits with ear pieces, and still not allowed to speak to the press. No other scientist has required security guards. After two days of evidence from Dr. Miller, we find that, regardless of the need to further her research addressing the decline of sockeye salmon, she notes that she has "*no departmental money or outside money to work on sockeye salmon from the Fraser River*"<sup>3</sup>. I believe the Cohen Commission is definitely leav-

ing the public wondering about the credibility of scientists and whether or not the truth is being told. I think Dr. Alexandra Morton summed up this feeling when asked on the stand why her perspective differed so greatly from industry and government scientists. She replied "*I don't work for a university, the government, the industry, or a First Nation – I'm completely independent.*"<sup>3</sup> Have we reached the point where, in the public perspective, the only unbiased scientists are ones who are independent (and frequently unpaid)?

I think we all know about situations, either through personal experience or through the experiences of our peers, where a scientist has been asked to "leave" information out of a report, or change the "angle" of the truth. As practitioners of Professional Biology, we, unlike some scientists, have a strong Code of Ethics and the support of the APB to help and guide us through experiences like this. We need to show the public that we, as scientists, are held accountable, and to quote from our ethics manual, "*have an obligation to tell .. the truth, the whole truth, the whole time*".

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<sup>1</sup>Events - National Science Advisor Addresses Canada's Big Science Issue. <http://www.nrc-cnrc.gc.ca/eng/events/cnbc/2004/06/19/science-advisor.html>.

<sup>2</sup>Feds silence Nanaimo scientist over salmon study. New research helps explain why salmon stocks are dwindling. Vancouver Sun. <http://www.canada.com/technology/Feds+silence+Nanaimo+scientist+over+salmon+study/5163289/story.html>.

<sup>3</sup>Cohen Commission Transcripts. <http://www.cohencommission.ca/en/>.

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