

Comments on the Liberal government's Chief Science Officer

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in the 41st Parliament

Promises

“We will appoint a Chief Science Officer (CSO) who will ensure that government science is fully available to the public, that scientists are able to speak freely about their work, and that scientific analyses are considered when the government makes decisions.”

Mandate Letter

Mandate letter of Minister of Science gives her responsibility to implement this. and, "Support your Ministerial colleagues as they re-insert scientific considerations into the heart of our decision-making and investment choices."

Mandate Letter

Mandate letter of President of the Treasury Board: "Take a leadership role to review policies to improve the use of evidence and data in program innovation and evaluation, more open data..."

What do I want from a Chief Science Officer?

My viewpoint is as an elected politician
(definition: losing 5 votes is a big deal)

...who wants science-informed decisions to be a permanent feature of the federal government

How can CSO be most helpful and beneficial to a government-of-the-day of any stripe, that is committed to science-informed policy making?

How can you help ministers/politicians?

For access and influence, help with two time-consuming but critical chores of politicians:

- Gather information, sufficient depth, sufficiently broad, in addition be able to prove that consultation was adequate
- Communicate policy decisions, defend them from criticism (politicians know: “you can only do what you can communicate”)

The CSO can best help political ministers by

- Reporting directly to Prime Minister and cabinet, and earning their trust by making it clear that the goal of the CSO is the overall success of the government of the day, and nothing else
- Has staff who, between them, can communicate on a technical level with science experts in all fields.
- Sits in PCO, non-partisan, infrastructure for collecting scientific information survives changes in government, plugged in the PCO's policy making process, avoids duplication with existing PCO.
- does not comment publicly on policy, does not advocate for scientists, science communities or science funding

The CSO can best help political ministers by

- Helping cabinet access scientific information it needs, in a timely manner, with links to trusted expertise across government, Canada and the world
- Paying attention to the quality of science information received, the comprehensiveness
- Helping ministers understand the uncertainties of scientific information when considering politically controversial issues (anticipating and preparing for these issues in advance)
- Also on tap for emergency situations requiring scientific input

The CSO can best help political ministers by

- Making sure they are never surprised or unable to answer a question like, “why didn’t you consider this piece of information?”
- One of the hard lessons on the road to being a veteran politician is paying the price for not having consulted enough. It’s time-consuming work. The CSO should help when it comes to science.

The CSO can best help political ministers by

- Helping to communicate science simply, clearly, honestly, preventing them from getting into, “if you are explaining, you are losing” situation.
- Proactively building up and maintaining trust in journalists, public, science community
- Any government who cares about details, that is willing to adopt policies that require some explanation, **MUST** rely on public trust. You can never explain all the details to everyone

Some specific duties

“ensure that government science is fully available to the public, that scientists are able to speak freely about their work”

- Periodically evaluate how government's scientific research results are preserved and accessed
- Be the point of contact for government scientists with regards to concerns about their scientific integrity
- Respond to concerns raised by journalists, public

Some specific duties

“ensure that government science is fully available to the public, that scientists are able to speak freely about their work”

- Help government elaborate exceptions to scientists speaking freely about their research: (a) public safety, (b) proprietary information and personal privacy, (c) publicly commenting on policy related to their research, (d) internal scientific peer review to protect institutional reputation
- Defend reputation of federal science capacity if it comes under political attack

Some specific duties

“ensure... that scientific analyses are considered when the government makes decisions”

- Monitor implementation of something like “Science Advice for Government Effectiveness” (1999) principles
- Help create the checklist that helps ministers by allowing them a way to honestly and credibly claim that decisions were informed by the best available science

Some specific duties

“ensure... that scientific analyses are considered when the government makes decisions”

- Establish network/database of fair, trusted science expertise ready to provide immediately needed information, available for informal briefings to cabinet, ready for emergencies.
- Help create or be the link to existing advisory panels for more extensive, long term policy questions. Help choose panel members with expertise, credibility to stakeholders, political sensitivity and transparency in mind. Make sure panel is only providing disinterested information to government.

Some specific duties

“ensure... that scientific analyses are considered when the government makes decisions”

- Help minister/politicians learn to extract maximum value from available scientific resources
- Help decision makers proactively ask for research to help answer politically important science questions
- Helping to formulate a strategy for science staffing and infrastructure so that the government has the intramural science capacity needed for the future

Some specific duties

“ensure... that scientific analyses are considered when the government makes decisions”

- Make sure level of uncertainty in scientific information is conveyed and understood, help ministers avoid surprises from gaps in science, understand disagreements within the science community within the context of normal scientific uncertainty
- Help cabinet prepare to communicate controversial science-informed decisions. Thinking about communications usually occurs before final decisions are made. Understand any public misconceptions that have communications consequences.

Some specific duties

“ensure... that scientific analyses are considered when the government makes decisions”

- Work with any Parliamentary Science Officer (PSO) to make sure science agrees, or at least differences are identified and explained within scientific notions of uncertainty – no surprises, no political fights with cherry-picked science
- PSO in a position to publicly contradict government, CSO is not.

Some specific duties

“ensure... that scientific analyses are considered when the government makes decisions”

- Proactively track research relevant to hot button, scientifically uncertain, values-driven, political issues on the horizon, Peter Gluckman’s “post-normative science” which he says is a significant portion of his work. Mitigate future trouble from lack of timely relevant scientific input for government of the day.

Some specific duties

“ensure... that scientific analyses are considered when the government makes decisions”

- Know where public may be misinformed about science, encourage the development of receptors for science in the public debate over policy
- Know where there is work to be done to earn social license
- Know where false impressions or lack of knowledge are being exploited for political purposes