

GREEN SCENE

Truth and science have taken hits under Harper

by Elaine Golds

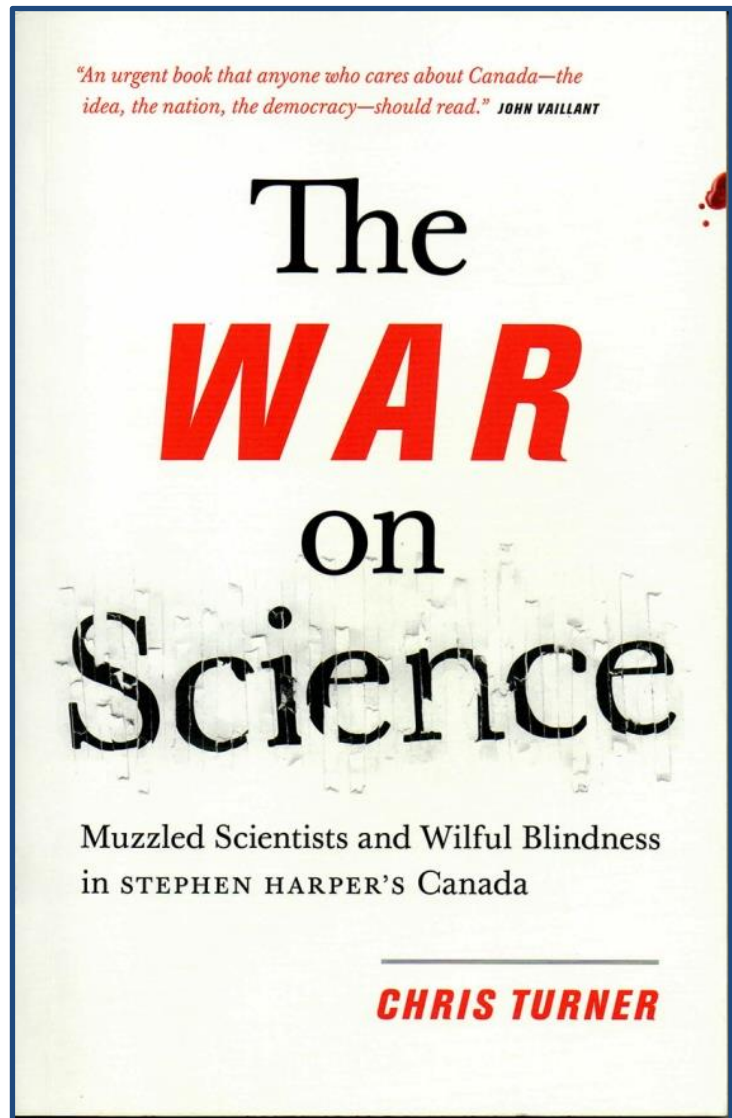
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Before our family moved to the Tri-Cities more than two decades ago, I worked as a medical research scientist at McGill University in Montreal in the field of immunology. Thus, while nature is my passion, science is my chosen profession.

The quest for truth and knowledge that are the driving force behind scientific research always struck me as being an honourable pursuit. The first step in solving any problem is acquiring the relevant information. To me, basing decisions on evidence acquired through scientific inquiry seems logical, reasonable and progressive.

I have, therefore, been profoundly disturbed by policies of the Stephen Harper government that have prevented our federal scientists from openly speaking the truth and, in some cases, have brought a halt to world-class research programs that need to be continued if we wish to pass on a healthy environment to future generations.

Chris Turner's book, published in 2013, is still relevant reading for today.



It started with the Conservative government's decision in 2010 to stop collecting facts through the mandatory long form census. This was startling because all governments depend on having accurate

information to formulate effective programs and track their successes or failures. Economists and medical researchers alike need accurate data as a base from which to reach decisions.

This led to the resignation of Canada's chief statistician, Munir Sheikh, who said, in departing, "No country can be among the league of civilized societies without intelligent policy development."

Around the same time, scientists who worked for the federal government were being hampered in their ability to talk freely to reporters — something they had been allowed to do as a matter of course for years. For example, in 2001, when Kristina Miller, a Fisheries and Oceans Canada scientist, published a significant paper on diminishing Pacific salmon in the prestigious international journal *Science*, she was not allowed to speak to the press. Until then, this had been a standard response on the appearance of ground-breaking research.

I hung my head in shame over that incident. As it turned out, that was only the beginning as Canada was entering a dismal period in which the government would muzzle its scientists and suppress the truth.

I was equally appalled when Canada withdrew from the Kyoto Protocol at the end of 2011. Global climate change, caused by the burning of fossil fuels, is surely the greatest challenge we face in terms of protecting the planet from future droughts and the devastating storms that will have dire consequences for future generations.

While the Liberal federal government under Paul Martin had been slow to engage with industry to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, it had developed effective public education programs such as the One Tonne Challenge, which encouraged citizens to reduce their emissions and implemented programs to help homeowners improve home insulation. These were good first steps. But in 2011, the Harper government was moving backwards and denying climate change was a problem.

Then the boom landed with brute force in 2012 with the passage of two omnibus budget bills (or "ominous" bills, as I prefer to call them). Bills C-38 and C-45 were both extremely long documents that contained a number of harmful provisions that repealed or fundamentally altered a number of programs that had protected the environment. World-class research into marine and fresh water pollution was halted and award-winning scientists were fired. Fish habitat protection was eliminated as was the Canadian Environment Assessment Act. Almost all of our lakes and rivers lost their protection. It was later revealed all this was done because of a request from the fossil fuel industry.

In 2013, the Tory government started to shut down scientific fisheries libraries. Instead of insuring priceless original research papers, including some used by Carson, were protected for future generations, dumpsters arrived to collect what was now deemed trash.

A survey conducted of government scientists in late 2013 revealed that almost half of them were aware of instances in which their departments had suppressed information, which led to inaccurate and misleading impressions by the public and media.

Truth has been taking a big hit over the past few years.

Last year, the government passed Bill C-43, which limited the application of environmental laws to port lands and actually authorized the destruction of documents submitted with respect to port activities and allowed the elimination of public scrutiny.

To date, the Harper government has fired more than 2,000 scientists, including more than a hundred who once worked for Parks Canada.

A dark age has descended over the country I love.

Fortunately, we have a federal election on Oct. 19, which offers the possibility of change. Thus, while I urge people to vote for the candidate of their choice, I hope that choice will be for a candidate who supports scientific research and the ability of our scientists to speak the truth openly and freely.