

THIS WEEK

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Communication breakdown

A policy change that could discourage UK government scientists from talking to the media is a backwards step. All researchers need to speak up to put science on the political agenda.

The United Kingdom dissolved its Parliament this week, with politicians now dispatched from the centre of political power in London's Westminster to fight for their constituency seats ahead of the general election on 7 May. The work of the government, and government scientists, continues. But many have been unsettled by a controversial change in their working conditions, which could prevent how freely they can discuss their work with journalists.

On 16 March, the Civil Service Code was amended to state that all UK civil servants require “ministerial authorisation for any contact with the media”. There is some confusion over who exactly this applies to, but it could affect thousands of scientists, including those who work directly for government departments and those in arms-length agencies such as the Met Office.

Critics made comparisons with the situation in Canada, where scientists have complained about a perceived muzzling by their government. In a letter of protest sent to the UK government last week, the heads of the Science Media Centre, an influential London charity that connects scientists and journalists; the Association of British Science Writers; and the UK science-communications network Stemptra warned that the rule change would discourage many scientists from talking to the media.

It is unclear how much of a difference the rule change will make — even to the scientists concerned and their employers. After seeking clarification from the government, the Met Office — home to world-renowned climate-research unit the Hadley Centre — was told it is “business as usual” and that its researchers could, as before, still speak to the media “under the guidance” of the press office.

Even before the rule change, many scientists directly employed by government departments were quick to tell journalists “you’ll have to go through the press office”. And senior figures are unlikely to be deterred from speaking out, as Chris Smith, head of the Environment Agency, did in 2014 when he rebutted government criticism of his team’s response to severe UK floods. Yet Fiona Fox, chief executive of the Science Media Centre and a signatory to the letter, says that she has “concrete evidence” that some scientists have already turned down media interviews as a result of the policy change. Unfortunately, it will be near-impossible to gauge its true impact, because we will never know how many people decide not to talk to the press as a result of it.

Any block on transparency and openness is a step backwards. The government that takes over after the general election should clarify what it wants from its scientists, and how the rule change alters that. It should consider an exemption for researchers talking to the media about their work in acknowledged areas of public interest, such as climate or health.

What the next government will look like — and what its attitude to science will be — is remarkably unclear. As we discuss on page 16, the United Kingdom is in a state of political flux. The two historically heavyweight political parties, left-wing Labour and right-wing Conservative, are roughly tied in the polls. The traditional third-place party, the Liberal Democrats, has been bleeding support.

This has boosted a following for outsider parties such as the Green Party and the UK Independence Party, which opposes membership in the European Union. Regionally focused groups such as the Scottish National Party are also expected to make gains.

These traditionally smaller parties could end up holding the balance of power in the next Parliament, whether they end up as part of a formal coalition government or in a looser arrangement

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to support a minority government. Given the uncertainties, *Nature* has scrutinized the science policies of the minor parties. Science is unlikely to be a priority should any of them sit down to negotiate a share of power (with the possible exception of the climate-focused Greens). But their policies could end up determining how much money flows to research, and how it does so.

Government funding for science is at a crunch point in the United Kingdom. Amid years of austerity, the science budget has been held stable behind a ‘ring fence’. For the outgoing coalition government of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, this is a sign of its support for research. But it has meant the pain of budgets eroded by inflation. Many researchers think that more money is needed, but the current political debate is heavy with talk of more cutbacks.

Science was high on the agenda during and after the last election in 2010, with a prominent campaign springing up in support of research spending. Such statements seem more muted in 2015. Scientists in the United Kingdom should find their voices again. And governments should not muzzle them. ■

Tree cheers

The world must follow Brazil’s lead and do more to protect and restore forests.

When deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon started to fall a decade ago, many scientists and environmentalists attributed the drop to unrelated trends in global commodities markets, which briefly depressed agricultural production in 2005–06. The assumption was that a developing country such as Brazil could not possibly assert control over its domain, and that farmers and ranchers would soon return to their old habits. But they didn’t. Production recovered and then increased, while the rate of deforestation continued to fall. Brazil proved the sceptics wrong, and in doing so it changed the global conversation on forests, food and rural development.

As we explore in a News Feature on page 20, the drop in deforestation