

Canadian government is committed to science

SIR — In your Editorial ‘Science in retreat’ (*Nature* 451, 866; 2008), you criticize the Canadian Conservative government’s record on science issues. This criticism is unwarranted.

First, our government is committed to attracting and retaining talent, supporting world-leading research and ensuring that, through commercialization, the research discoveries of Canada’s best and brightest are transformed into practical applications. When prime minister Stephen Harper unveiled the national strategy Mobilizing Science and Technology to Canada’s Advantage in May 2007, he charted out the government’s much-needed change of direction on science and technology policy, heralded by the creation of the 18-member Science, Technology and Innovation Council to advise government and benchmark Canada’s performance against international standards of excellence.

Second, the Editorial neglected to mention important investments made by the government in research. For example, the Canadian Institutes for Health Research spends more than \$700 million a year, supporting the work of more than 11,000 researchers and trainees in universities, teaching hospitals and research institutes across Canada.

Third, the government has reversed years of cuts to federal fisheries science. The department’s science budget has been permanently increased, including an additional \$39 million over two years. We are modernizing our research facilities and have started to renew the coastguard fleet so that scientists have reliable platforms for their experiments. More researchers have been hired to work on Arctic science, and we have committed personnel, equipment and financial resources to the International Polar Year — the largest-ever international research programme into the Earth’s polar regions. Our \$150-million investment in this initiative will enable our scientists to work with colleagues from 60 other nations to study climate change and the health and well-being of northern communities.

Your comments about this government’s attitude towards climate change are misleading. Both the prime minister and the minister of the environment have frequently made it clear that the government considers climate change to be one of the greatest threats facing the world today and that it accepts the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports on the topic.

Finally, accusations that Environment Canada’s scientists are being “muzzled” are false. The government’s new media policy is in line with that of many other government departments, echoing the 2002 Government

Communications Policy. Since this new policy has been in place, Environment Canada’s scientists have done dozens of interviews in a variety of areas.

As for Canadian scientists who contributed to the Nobel Prize-winning IPCC group, the government has formally recognized them with a motion in the House of Commons in honour of their work, which was passed unanimously by all parties.

A factual assessment of our government’s record demonstrates a clear commitment to enhancing Canada’s reputation as a world leader in science and technology.

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Call for a centralized grant proposal repository

SIR — Writing grant proposals is difficult enough; keeping track of different deadlines makes for an endless cycle of procrastination and frantic preparation. The added stack of bureaucratic forms, with arcane variations from agency to agency, can tip one over the edge as a deadline nears.

Is it almost too obvious to wish for a centralized proposal repository? Investigators could submit proposals at any time, in a common format that highlights the science rather than obliterating it with red tape. Funding agencies could search the repository for proposals matching their interests. A minimum of bureaucratic information would be required up front. Budget details could be worked out between funding agencies and investigators as necessary.

Ideally, all proposals would be publicly accessible. However, most of the scientific community has not yet accepted the inevitable dawn of truly open science. Submissions to the repository could therefore be made accessible only to funding agencies that agree to keep proposals private (unless a submitting investigator indicates a willingness to share his or her proposal publicly).

A repository would make life easier for scientists by eliminating the hassle of searching for suitable grant mechanisms and the stress of meeting various deadlines. It would make life easier for funding agencies by expanding the pool of applications from which to choose. Of course, the best proposals could attract offers from multiple agencies. Rather than forcing investigators to choose non-overlapping sources of funding for each project, why not use the repository to mediate shared funding agreements that could benefit everyone involved? In effect, it would serve as the mediator between grant-seekers and grant-providers.

In a world where eBay, Facebook and Google powerfully demonstrate the communal nature of the Web, it is a pity that scientists and funding agencies don’t have a similarly modern forum for matching their interests and offers.

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Unfair statistics take the bloom off St Louis

SIR — I take issue with a statistic quoted from *Congressional Quarterly*’s 2007 publication ‘City Crime Rankings’ in your *Naturejobs* Regions feature ‘Almost in bloom’ (*Nature* 452, 122–124; 2008).

This statistic does a disservice to St Louis in ranking it as the second most dangerous city in the United States. *Congressional Quarterly*’s comparisons are unreliable because they are based on the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reports rankings, which are affected not only by the size of a city’s population but also by that of the surrounding suburbs.

As the crime rate equals the number of police-recorded crimes divided by the city’s residential population, cities with a small population relative to the surrounding suburbs will have inflated crime rates. The city of St Louis has about 10% of the metropolitan-area population (about 90% of the population lives in the suburbs), whereas the city of Memphis, for example, houses more than 50% of the relevant metropolitan-area population. Because assaults on suburbanites that happen in the city are included in the numerator but the victim is not included in the denominator, the crime rate of St Louis is inflated relative to that of Memphis.

If crime-rate comparisons are limited to metropolitan areas, the rankings can change dramatically — the position of St Louis moves to 120th (see R. Rosenfeld and J. Lauritsen *Contexts* 7, 66–67; 2008). Understanding the actual situation is important because, as noted in your feature, the way is then open for St Louis to become “a hip, feisty biotech hub”.

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