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Realism trumps hope at the EPA

Scott Pruitt's resignation from the US Environmental Protection Agency was long overdue. But the threat to science posed by Trump and his allies remains.

The most remarkable thing about Scott Pruitt's resignation from the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is that it took so long. By all accounts, he was unfit to lead one of the world's top science-based regulatory agencies. It wasn't just that the former Oklahoma attorney-general had a well-documented history of consorting with industry to fight the agency. It was his contradictory behaviour — exemplified by the installation of an expensive sound-proof phone booth in his office — which put a premium on secrecy even as he made grand proclamations about transparency. But by far the worst was Pruitt's utter disregard for both the science and the scientists under his charge — as we highlight in a News Feature this week (see page 316).

Ultimately, Pruitt seems to have been felled by the impunity he exhibited over the course of nearly a year and a half at the agency. Lawmakers on both sides of the political aisle raised alarms over his lavish spending and a series of alleged ethical transgressions that are more typical of crony governments elsewhere in the world.

His departure is welcome, but it would be naive to think that the prospects for the agency and its scientists are any brighter. His agenda — the same one as US President Donald Trump — remains intact. Trump made this all too clear in a pair of tweets announcing Pruitt's resignation on 5 July. The president declared that Pruitt had done an “outstanding job”, and said that the new acting administrator, Andrew Wheeler, a former coal lobbyist, “will continue on with our great and lasting EPA agenda”.

Trump has yet to formally nominate Wheeler as the next EPA administrator, but the move would be in keeping with the president's approach. A lawyer by training, Wheeler spent 4 years at the agency in the early 1990s, under former presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton. He later served as a top aide on the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee under Oklahoma Republican James Inhofe, a leading climate sceptic in Congress. Wheeler knows how the agency works, and is comfortable on Capitol Hill. In the words of one EPA scientist, who asked for anonymity, Wheeler is “a supremely effective and precise Washington operative”. This, of course, is both praise and a warning.

Wheeler will probably restore some kind of normal order at the agency, which means following conventional procedures, re-establishing fractured relations with staff scientists and avoiding the kind of embarrassing headlines that plagued Pruitt's tenure. Already, in his first week as acting administrator, Wheeler has delivered an all-hands address at the agency's research campus in Durham, North Carolina. That stands in stark contrast to Pruitt, who quietly dipped in and out of the campus a few weeks ago, before he stepped down, with no word to the full staff. Not once during his tenure did Pruitt make time to address the EPA's Office of Research and Development, which houses the bulk of the agency's scientists — hardly the way to either inspire loyalty or demonstrate he was on top of his brief.

Under a new boss, EPA researchers might even be able to present

their findings once again to the leadership, as the administration deliberates over environmental and public-health regulations. Such scientific consultations — fundamental to the establishment of science-based policies that can withstand the inevitable legal challenges that follow — were often eschewed under Pruitt, who showed little regard for the importance of evidence.

Scientists should be wary about celebrating Pruitt's exit. They should be careful what they wish for. The problem is that if Wheeler — or whoever takes on the job full-time — is more effective than Pruitt (and they could hardly be otherwise), then Trump's problematic policies are likely to have more impact, too. And that could spell more trouble for public health and the environment, not just in the United States but around the globe — at a time when a sound and evidence-based approach to both has never been so critical.

A fundamental goal of many of Trump's efforts and policies is to relieve US industry of what he regards as regulatory burdens. Republican rhetoric has been trending in that direction for years, particularly when it comes to regulations that combat climate change but that industries find expensive or cumbersome. Indeed, the vast majority of conservative lawmakers have either actively disavowed mainstream science or turned a blind eye to the pressing need to address one of the biggest challenges of the twenty-first century. It's a disgrace that will go down in the history books, but

Trump and his team have pushed things to a new extreme. Rather than simply rolling back regulations, Pruitt sought to straitjacket the EPA and undermine the role of both science and scientists in regulatory policy. For example, he banned scientists with EPA grants from serving on the agency's advisory boards, and proposed a rule that would prevent the agency from citing public-health research for which the underlying data are not publicly available — including high-quality epidemiological studies that help to provide the technical basis for current air-quality regulations, but whose data must be partially hidden to protect patients' identities.

Republicans on Capitol Hill have provided a glimmer of hope by repeatedly rejecting Trump's proposals to slash the EPA budget as well as funding for climate and energy research at other agencies, but money alone won't solve the problems that EPA scientists face today. What's needed are policies that give deference to evidence and that allow agency researchers to follow the science wherever it might lead — even if politicians don't like the implications.

Environmentalism needn't be a partisan issue. It was one of the Republicans' own, Richard Nixon, who oversaw the creation of the EPA, and the last major upgrade to the Clean Air Act came under the first Bush administration. Wheeler might be more successful in implementing Trump's policies, but that's dangerous, as Trump is completely out of touch with scientific reality. ■

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