

Biochemist chosen as Canada's chief science adviser

Mona Nemer is a former administrator at the University of Ottawa whose research has focused on cardiovascular problems.

Nicola Jones

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Geoff Robins/AFP/Getty

Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau's government launched its search for a chief science adviser in late 2016.

Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau has appointed biochemist Mona Nemer as his country's chief government science adviser, fulfilling his campaign promise to establish the position.

Nemer was most recently vice-president of research at the University of Ottawa and director of the Molecular Genetics and Cardiac Regeneration Laboratory there. Her scientific work has focused on the genetics of cardiovascular disease and birth defects.

In her new role, Nemer will have a budget of Can\$2 million and report to Trudeau and science minister Kirsty Duncan. The country has been without a science adviser for nearly a decade; the last time such a post existed was from 2004 to 2008.

The initial reaction to her appointment has been positive.

“I do know her and she’s fantastic,” says Jim Woodgett, a biologist at the Lunenfeld-Tanenbaum Research Institute in Toronto, who has advocated reforms to Canada's funding institute for health research. “She’s tough, but very very fair. She has the stature, and trust of other scientists.”

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“She’ll do a great job,” tweeted innovation-policy expert Rob Annan. And Arvind Gupta, former president of the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, called Nemer “an inspired choice”.

As chief science adviser, Nemer will advise the government on ensuring that government science is publicly available and that scientists are able to speak freely about their work, according to the official job description. The adviser is also charged with ensuring that scientific analyses are incorporated into the government's decisions.

Welcome decision

Trudeau's centre-left Liberal government created the position in part as a response to the science community’s dissatisfaction with the previous Conservative government headed by Stephen Harper between 2006 and 2015. Under Harper, the government was accused of muzzling scientists and sidelining scientific evidence in policymaking.

Nemer's appointment has been a long time coming. Trudeau was elected in October 2015, and appointed Duncan as science minister weeks later — charging her with establishing the adviser post. The job hunt started in December 2016, and applications were in hand by mid-February 2017. It has taken the government more than six months to settle on a candidate.

“I’m quite happy that they have finally appointed someone,” says Debi Daviau, president of the Ottawa-based Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada, the union for government scientists. “It’s been a couple of years coming.”

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Updates

Updated: Updated with comments from Woodgett and Daviau.