



“I come from your world”, new Science Minister tells CSPC delegates

Keynote speech: Hon. Kirsty Duncan, Minister of Science

CSPC 2015: November 26, 2015

Takeaways

- ✓ Evidence-based policymaking matters
- ✓ An innovation economy depends on both basic and applied science
- ✓ A Chief Science Officer needs the right mechanisms in place to work best
- ✓ Promote STEM career choices and co-op placements

It was standing room only when Canada's freshly minted science minister spoke to the country's largest gathering of professionals working in the fields of science, technology and innovation. The interest wasn't unexpected. Canada's scientific community rallied against the previous federal government for its lacklustre financial support for science, particularly basic science, its restriction on allowing government scientists to speak freely about their work, and for constraining or eliminating several high-profile research labs, scientific institutions and other data-gathering organizations, including the long-form census.

Under the new Liberal government, Dr. Duncan insisted there would be a new style of leadership and a markedly different approach to science and policy, one grounded in collaboration, openness and respect. She then thanked all the scientists present for their contributions. “It is respected. It is valued and it is celebrated.”

Duncan's mandate letter, and those of her Cabinet colleagues released publicly for the first time, describes her overarching goal as supporting scientific research and the integration of scientific considerations into the government's investment and policy choices.

“We are a government that fully embraces science and research. We believe good scientific knowledge should inform decision making.”

That knowledge doesn't just come from applied, industry-focused science, she said, it also comes from “transformational discoveries”. “And, I would argue that, today, science matters more than ever before because the challenges we face, like climate change and shrinking biodiversity, are ever greater.”

The new government has already begun acting on some of its campaign promises. One of its first acts upon taking office was to reinstate the long-form census, “because **the benefits of good quality data cannot be overstated** for economic and social researchers, for policy-makers (and) for communities,” said Duncan. Departments have also begun sending memos to government scientists and experts making it clear that “they can and should speak freely about their work”.

As science minister, one of Duncan's first jobs will be to travel the country meeting with researchers and other stakeholders to hear their priorities. “What investments have we been making in people, infrastructure and science, and how do we compare internationally? What is student interest in the STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) disciplines? These are the types of questions I am investigating.”

She is also tasked with establishing a new Chief Science Officer with a clear mandate and “the right mechanisms to make this work best”. “This position will be a key to ensuring that scientific communication is sustained across government in an effective way.”

Dr. Duncan is a medical geographer and former scientist whose research contributed to the UN climate-change panel that won a Nobel peace prize. In 1998, she assembled an expedition to an island north of Norway to discover the cause of the 1918 Spanish influenza—a pandemic that killed upwards of 50 million people in just one year. In 2003, she wrote a book about her expedition, entitled *Hunting the 1918 Flu: One Scientist's Search for a Killer Virus*.

“Our goal was to learn as much as we could about the virus so that we could test drugs against history’s deadliest disease—and perhaps even help make a better flu vaccine.”

Unlike previous junior science ministers or parliamentary science secretaries, the science minister will be elevated to a full cabinet position, one that gives Duncan and other Ministers of State a coveted seat at the cabinet table.

References:

Dr. Kirsty Duncan, Science Minister, speech to CSPC; www.youtube.com/watch?v=G6Z1WxELjao

Science Minister’s mandate letter; <http://pm.gc.ca/eng/minister-science-mandate-letter#sthash.SUAMc3Gi.dpuf>