



Does Canada need a chief scientist, a parliamentary science officer or both?

Panel: Who should be the Voice for Science within government?

Organized by Evidence for Democracy

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Panelists: **Katie Gibbs**, Executive Director, Evidence for Democracy; **Nicole Arbour**, Senior International Advisor Government and International Relations, National Research Council of Canada; **Patrick Fafard**, Associate Professor, Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, University of Ottawa; **Ted Hsu**, former MP Kingston & the Islands, Liberal Party of Canada Science critic; **Kevin Page**, Jean-Luc Pepin Research Chair in the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ottawa

Takeaways and recommendations

- ✓ CSO and PBO need a clear mandate and a large enough budget to support that mandate
- ✓ Position must be independent and non-partisan
- ✓ Learn from the experience and lessons of other countries
- ✓ Consult widely before establishing the position, and review the scientific literature on science advice
- ✓ If want oversight and accountability, establish a PSO which reports directly to Parliament
- ✓ Determine how position fits within larger system of science advice

The policy issue: The new Liberal government in Ottawa has promised to appoint a Chief Science Officer (CSO) “who will ensure that government science is fully available to the public, that scientists are able to speak freely about their work, and that scientific analyses are considered when the government makes decisions.” The NDP also wants a Parliamentary Science Officer (PSO). Where should Canadian policymakers get their science advice?

The options: Drawing on her experience as Team Lead for the UK’s Science and Innovation Network in Canada, Arbour told CSPC delegates that if you want a CSO and/or PSO that is long-term and non-partisan, “**take the time necessary to ensure we get it right the first time**”.

Start by studying the experience of other countries, and refer to the wealth of scientific literature published on the issue of science advice to government. For example, a recent OCED report includes a check-list to help governments design a process that enhances the efficiency and quality of science advice and builds trust between scientists, policymakers and the public. Such a checklist could be attached to all Cabinet briefing materials to help politicians demonstrate how evidence informed their decisions.

“A check list idea helps decision-makers know when they’ve fulfilled their promise of making sure decisions were informed by science,” said Hsu.

In the UK, Arbour said evidence-based decision-making is embedded across all of government, including a Parliamentary Office for S&T, a chief science officer, a House of Commons S&T committee and individual government departments. “There’s a lot we can learn from different parts of this system.”

Hsu said a CSO needs top-level support, which means reporting directly to the prime minister and Cabinet. He added that a CSO can help Cabinet ministers do their job by consulting with the right stakeholders to gather good science for informed policymaking—and then **help politicians communicate the science simply, clearly and honestly.**

Good science advice helps to build and maintain trust with the public, journalists and the scientific community, added Hsu. But this requires politicians having the information they need to easily explain and defend their choices with these audiences, thus avoiding what Hsu described as the “if you’re explaining, you’re losing” situation. “You must rely on public trust. You can never explain all the details.”

One challenge for a CSO, said Page, will be to resist political pressure; something he contends is inevitable under any political party. When establishing either a CSO or PSO, he said it’s essential to **“right size the mandate with the budget”**. As Parliamentary Budget Officer, he said they inherited weak legislation, a huge mandate and a small budget. “We suffered from low expectations in our office. They didn’t think we could do anything.” This led to conflicts with the governing party when the PBO began producing cost estimates that were often much higher than what the government presented.

Other big issues for Page are governance and independence. A CSO, as proposed by the Liberals, would likely report to Cabinet and the Prime Minister. However, if Canada wants an office that uses sciences to provide oversight and accountability, the position should report directly to Parliament. **“Science for policy making and science for oversight are different.”** And, if the science community thinks oversight is needed then, “Don’t be nice. Speak up.”

Fafard believes creating a PSO is a bad idea since it would report to Parliament—an institution more focused on holding the government of the day to account than policymaking. **“If the goal is evidence-based policy, then don’t start with PSO.”** However, a PSO may work, added Fafard, if the new government also introduces a package of democratic reforms, such as stronger House of Commons committees (e.g., including secret ballots for committee chairs and “reasonable” budgets), a reformed Senate, and more free votes in the House and Senate.

As for a CSO, he cautions against this position becoming nothing more than a cheerleader for science within government (e.g., more funding). Rather, he supports the idea of an “honest broker” between the scientific and political communities who can expand the range of choices available to decision makers.

He said it’s also important for a CSO “to understand how it fits within existing structures for how policy advice is provided” and to recognize that science is just one input into the decision-making process. “In a democracy, we want our politicians to take a lot of things into account. Evidence is one.”

“And,” added Fafard, **“be darn sure that whatever role you put in place is engineered to fit with existing system of policy advice provided to the Prime Minister.”**

Optional box: OCED checklist for effective and trustworthy science advisory processes:

- ✓ Have a clear remit, with defined roles and responsibilities for its various actors.
- ✓ Involve the relevant actors – scientists, policy-makers and other stakeholders, as necessary.
- ✓ Produce advice that is sound, unbiased and legitimate.

Relevant documents:

Minister of Science Mandate Letter; <http://pm.gc.ca/eng/minister-science-mandate-letter>

Bill C-558; <http://openparliament.ca/bills/41-2/C-558>

Scientific Advice for Policymaking: The Role and Responsibility of Expert Bodies and Individual Scientists, OECD Global Science Forum, April 2015; <http://www.oecd.org/science/sci-tech/science-advice.htm>

Synthesis Report: Science Advice to Governments Conference, (Auckland, November 2014) www.pmcsa.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/Synthesis-Report_Science-Advice-to-Governments_August-2014.pdf