

# Matter. Of. Fact. If only government decisions were...

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I depend on my mechanic to identify the source of my 12-year-old car's ignition problem before charging me \$500 for a new part and the labour required to replace it. I count on my doctor to review the research into the long-term side effects of hormone replacement therapy before advising me about whether or not my body-drenching hot flashes can be safely treated with pharmaceuticals. And I deeply appreciate that engineers responsible for building bridges and skyscrapers are required to base their calculations on proven formulas and equations.

Moreover, should I ever be charged with running a red light, stealing my neighbour's geraniums or plotting a terrorist attack, I've come to believe that the justice system will weigh the physical evidence for and against the charges before deciding on my guilt or innocence.

Is it too much to expect my governments – supported by one of the best-educated and most-respected civil services in the world (not to mention my tax dollars) – to rely on reputable research when making major spending and policy decisions on my behalf?

I don't think so.

Like most Canadians, I don't have a PhD in criminology, statistics or environmental studies. I'm not remotely qualified to judge the validity of scientific research relating to global warming, the efficacy of mandatory minimum sentences, or the effect of mining development on the health and sustainability of natural resources.

So I appreciate living in a country where education is a right, university research is well-funded, and world-class scientists boast in-depth expertise about everything from the impact of early childhood education on crime prevention to the efficacy of MRIs in detecting cancer.

But right now I'm wondering: What's the point of funding such research and supporting institutes of higher learning if the knowledge they produce is repeatedly disregarded?

I understand that studies are sometimes contradictory, that methodology must be rigorous, that statistics can lie. But I also understand the value of disinterested investigation, the power of aggregated research, and the benefits of multi-disciplinary approaches to assessing problems.

And on balance, I have to say it's been a tough year for Canadians who prefer facts over dogma, and defensible public policy over base-appeasing partisan politics. Reading the daily paper or watching the nightly news recently makes me feel like I've entered a parallel universe – one where it's acceptable practice for responsible adults to cover their ears and shout "I can't hear you!" in order to avoid being confronted by information that doesn't appeal to them.

Take the get-tough-on-crime legislation – please. A doubling of expenditures on prisons – almost \$2-billion over five years – to incarcerate more people at a time when crime rates are falling and the U.S. experiment reveals the practice to be demonstrably ineffective. Follow that with the unwillingness to recognize, let alone attempt to address, the undeniable and potentially significant impacts of climate change (regardless of what's causing them). Add in the complete dismissal of widespread and considered criticism of the economic and social costs of scrapping the long-form census.

Then top it all off with last week's double-barrelled revelations: In blatant contradiction of the government's frequent insistence that the long-gun registry is a pox on rural Canada, the research-supported news that the registry actually aids police and saves lives in rural areas. Secondly, the independent analysis of the pollutants in Alberta's Athabasca River fingering oil sands development as a significant factor.

The flat earth theory was discredited quite a few centuries ago and "evidence-based practice" is all over the Internet, so it's not like the tradition is a little-known secret. So what would it take for Canadians to insist that the decisions being made about our

collective future be informed by verifiable knowledge?

Consider this as one citizen's plea for scientists of all stripes to step onto the information highway in all its forms a little more often, to challenge governments and voters alike to demand that policies and spending be backed up by reliable and independent data.

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