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THOMAS HAYDEN SCIENCE 10.26.15 7:00 AM

# CANADA'S NEW GOVERNMENT MAY BE A NEW BEGINNING FOR SCIENCE



waits for exiting Prime

TODD

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When Simon Donner, a climate scientist at the University of British

Columbia, visited a sprawling Canadian government research center last spring, it wasn't the empty hallways and sparsely occupied laboratories that stuck with him. You'd expect those ghost town conditions after years of cutbacks and attrition. What really got him was the cafeteria.

Donner's hosts suggested coffee; he figured he'd be able to get a bite to eat as well. "Instead, it was a huge indoor lunch room," he says. The once-bustling kitchen was locked behind a sliding grate, the food vendor long gone in search of customers. Donner and his hosts had to make do with coffee from a vending machine.

Canadian scientists have been making do for nearly a decade, in the face of funding cuts, federal lab closures, and a blanket gag order on government researchers. For them, the fall of Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservative government in the October 19 national election wasn't just a relief—it was the rough emotional equivalent of blowing up the Death Star. And the fact that Liberal leader Justin Trudeau won with a surprise majority government, avoiding the mess and gridlock of power sharing, was like having dreamy Han Solo emerge from the explosion and sign on to be your lab partner.

The litany of complaints against Harper is long. In science, they come down mainly to cutbacks in funding and a shift away from discovery research to projects more focused on the short-term needs of industry and commerce. To make matters worse, scientists throughout the bureaucracy faced limits on talking with the press about just about anything. The results were dramatic and widespread.

"Many federal scientists, including high-profile successful researchers with thriving laboratories, were laid off," says Linda Campbell, an aquatic ecologist at Saint Mary's University in Halifax. "Funds for whole programs were halted." As a university researcher, Campbell wasn't subject to direct hits from the cutbacks. "But I have many collaborations with federal scientists which were significantly impacted by all the

restrictions, which in turn impacted my group's research.”

The most iconic of those cuts centered on a cluster of 58 small lakes in northwestern Ontario. In June 2012, an omnibus budget bill zeroed out the \$2 million operating budget for the Experimental Lakes Area, a key location in ecosystems research where scientists first discovered acid rain, among other things. Maggie Xenopoulos, an aquatic ecologist at Trent University in Peterborough, was part of a team that got funding in 2011 to run the first major study at the ELA on the environmental impacts of silver nanoparticles—used as antibacterial agents in everything from cutting boards to fancy underpants. Then the government shut the ELA down. Technically Xenopoulos still had funding, but she had nowhere to do the actual research.

A combination of provincial money, new management, and the concentrated outrage of several thousand scientists who marched on Parliament Hill in Ottawa in July of 2012 ultimately kept the ELA open. “We all did our best to save the ELA,” says Xenopoulos, whose nanosilver study finally launched in 2014. “But it’s not out of the woods yet.”

The same could be said for Canadian science as a whole. Trudeau has made some specific statements about reversing budget cuts, including for the ELA. “They have to do something on this,” says Rob Thacker, an astronomer at St. Mary’s (and Campbell’s husband). But for the most part, Thacker says, “the Liberals actually are being really cagey” about specifics. Hopes are high that science advocates will be appointed to the new cabinet, including Marc Garneau, an electrical engineer, former astronaut, and the first Canadian in space; announcements are supposed to happen by November 4.

“I’m heartened by what Trudeau is saying about so far about trusting science and expertise,” says UBC’s Donner. “But my concern is really structural.” Just as it’s easier to cut taxes than to levy new ones, he says, “it’s easier to close a lab than it is to start a new one. There’s a structural deficit now and it may take a long time to come back.”

One of Harper’s most notorious moves was a gag order preventing government scientists from speaking to the media. “No government scientist I knew ever had problems sticking to their areas of expertise,” says [Alex Bielak](#), a former senior official with Environment Canada who retired early to write and pursue other less-stressful pursuits.

Environment Canada assigned him a minder even for an interview with a journalism student—about science communication.

“It’s sad,” says Donner. “It made science political, a partisan activity, and nothing could be further from the truth. There’s a psychological toll to that.” Even if lost funding is restored, valuable programs reconstituted, and shuttered cafeterias one day opened for service again; a generation of Canadian scientists has been marked.

Still, says Bielak, “there’s a sense of lightness now.” He celebrated at home on election night, he says, with champagne, close family and friends, and a huge sense of relief. He knows that Harper’s Liberal predecessors cut Canadian science funding, too. “But some of the cuts will be reversed, I suspect, and the more draconian restrictions on talking to the press will be lifted.”

For the moment, at least, that seems to be enough to raise spirits. After nine years of the Harper deep freeze, even a mild thaw feels like springtime.

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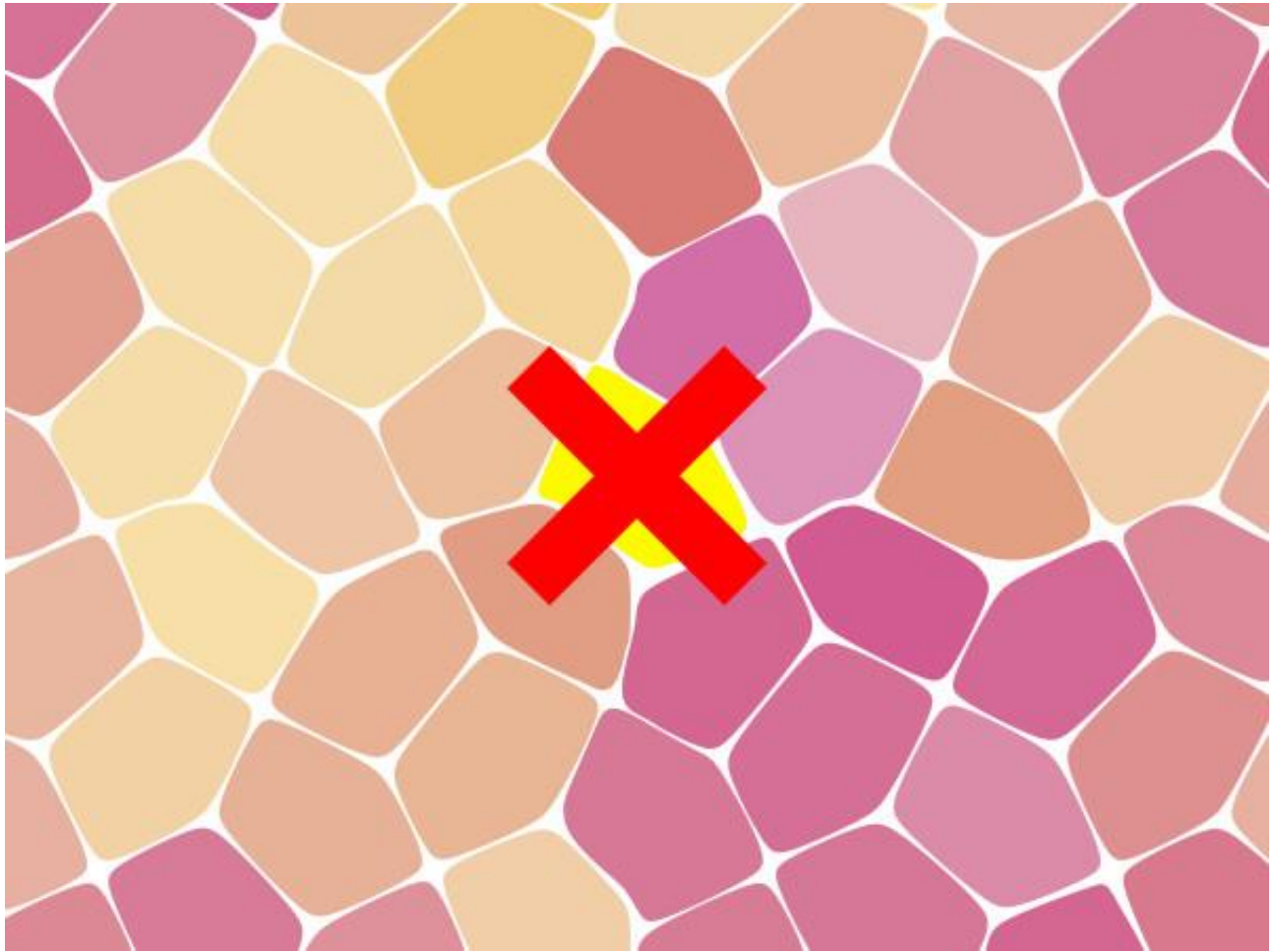


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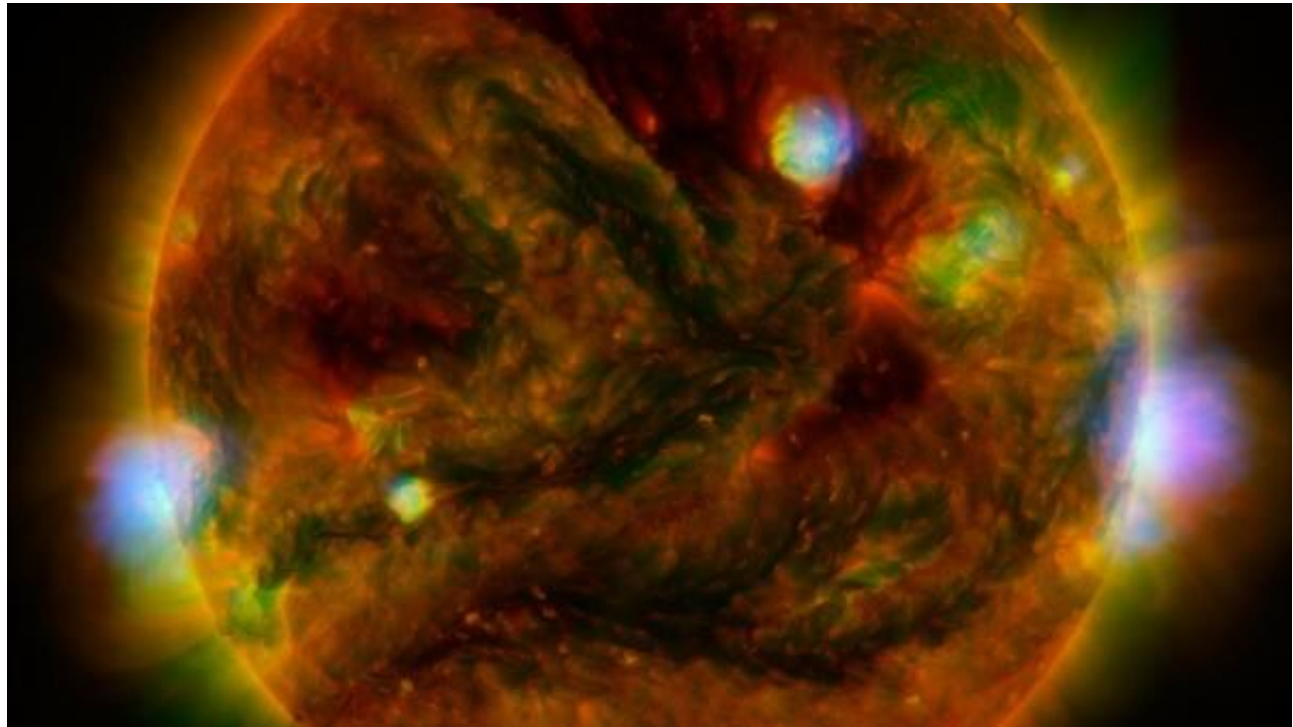
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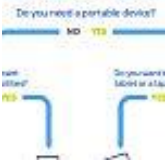
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