

SENT VIA EMAIL 06/06/17

Dear Jeremy,

Thank you so much for your swift response to our joint letter on the impact of purdah on science. We very much appreciate the clear and unambiguous statement that “the principles are not, and have never been about restricting commentary from independent academics” and that “researchers wishing to comment during the election period should do so under their university affiliation”. This clarification will enable press officers in universities and research councils to reassure nervous academics that they can publish and comment during an election using their university affiliation irrespective of whether they are funded by research councils or sit on scientific advisory committees to government.

We of course appreciate that you are not going to change the rules for this election but we are pleased to note that you do your own review of the way purdah operates after each election. During this election we have observed more impact from purdah on publicly funded scientists, and have also seen more public objection to that, including most recently a letter from the [President of the Royal Society](#) and a strongly worded [editorial in the Lancet](#). I have asked organisations to collate and share examples as you suggest and we will follow up this letter with a comprehensive list of examples.

When you come to review these after the election, we would ask you to also look at the specific issues raised in our original letter and this letter which were not addressed in your response. We remain concerned that sensible restrictions on civil servants working in government departments and non-departmental public bodies are being applied to publicly funded research scientists in a way which does not make sense and damages the public interest.

We would stress that none of this is intended to expose the civil service but, as you have seen from the last few weeks, confusion about the rules has made it more of an issue not less. As the purpose of purdah is to aid democratic discussion and reduce interference we believe that the publication of scientific results, and commentary by independent academics on high profile and controversial science stories should be viewed as a success of the rules, not a weakness or grey area.

We ask that you look again at the following four issues:

Researchers working in Research Council units and institutes

We understand that head office staff and board members of the UK’s research councils are covered by purdah. However many scientists are perplexed as to why these restrictions are now extended so heavily to scientists who work in the research council research institutes. Your letter refers to the Research Councils UK guidelines: “Research Council-funded researchers wishing to comment during the election period should do so under their university affiliation rather than the Research Councils.” But many research council-funded scientists work in research council research units and institutes and do not have a university affiliation to call on. Some have told us that they were exempt from purdah in the past and that a case has never been made for the extension of purdah. These scientists, in institutes like the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, the Laboratory of Molecular Biology, the British Antarctic Survey, the National Oceanographic Centre and the British Geological Survey are concerned about being treated as if they are civil servants and worried about the precedent that sets for future. While we understand that these units and institutes can be expected to postpone major announcements that would take air time away from politicians, we cannot see how it is acceptable to restrict them from being allowed to

explain their own research being published in peer reviewed journals, from commenting as third-party experts on other new studies, or from providing scientific comments on breaking news in their area of expertise. Those of us charged with improving the public understanding of science are troubled by restrictions which mean that the public loses access to thousands of the best scientific experts in the country on important topical issues. Given that purdah is a convention and not a rule we would ask that the Cabinet Office considers a return to the past when the scientists in research council establishments were exempted from the restrictions on head office staff.

Scientists working in government laboratories

We also have concerns about researchers working in research institutes directly reporting to government departments including the Department of Health and the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs. These institutes include Forest Research, the National Institute for Biological Standards and Control, the PHE Centre for Radiation, Chemical and Environmental Hazards, and the Animal & Plant Health Agency. These scientists do work more directly for government than their colleagues in research council establishments and they sign the civil service code. But they are first and foremost scientific researchers and many move in and out of universities and research institutes. We accept that where possible they should be required to delay any major new announcements or publication of reports until after an election. However, researchers working at these institutes are often the leading experts in the UK on specific areas of science which may hit the news at any time. For example if stories like the Fukushima disaster, ash dieback, Zika, Ebola, Litvinenko etc. broke during an election journalists and the public would need to speak to and hear from these scientists to get the best information. We feel very strongly that purdah should be applied differently to these researchers than to experts in their parent departments and that they should be encouraged to comment on breaking stories no matter how contentious or high profile. The alternative is for journalists and the public to have to rely on less authoritative voices, with a resulting impact on the quality of public debate.

University academics who also sit on Scientific Advisory Committees

Your letter did not directly address the example we provided of independent academics who also sit on Scientific Advisory Committees to the government. Your unequivocal statement that purdah does not apply to university academics should cover this and should allow Scientific Advisory Committee members who are university academics to speak as normal as long as they use their university affiliations. However this is not the advice that was given to members of the Committee on the Medical Effects of Air Pollutants by Public Health England and the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs during this purdah. They were contacted and discouraged from speaking on a government announcement on air pollution because of purdah. They were not advised they could do so in their academic capacity. We would be keen that any internal review would address the issue of civil servants who proactively advise such scientists not to comment, against the principles outlined in your letter.

Conflicting guidance

We are aware of three sets of guidance currently in circulation – from the [Cabinet Office](#), the research councils and [Innovate UK](#) – that each vary in the degree of restriction on researchers. On top of this, new verbal guidance appears to be offered at each election, and sometimes additional advice is offered in emails sent by government on specific stories, as in the example above from the Committee on the Medical Effects of Air Pollutants. These different sets of guidance are confusing, particularly for organisations such as universities and research institutes which might feel they are subject to all three.

Conclusion

We appreciate your engagement with our concerns and your commitment to avoiding a situation where independent scientists are being too heavily caught up in rules intended for government actors. We are on hand if anyone in your team would like to clarify any of our points or seek additional evidence for our concerns. We will finish compiling our list of specific examples after the election and share it with yourself and Sue Gray.

Best wishes,

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