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27 March 2015

Rt Hon Francis Maude MP
Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General
70 Whitehall
London
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Cc

Sir Jeremy Heywood, Cabinet Secretary & Head of the Civil Service
Mr Simon Claydon, Deputy Director Civil Service Workforce Reform
Professor Sir Mark Walport, Government Chief Scientific Adviser
Professor Dame Sally Davies, Chief Medical Officer
Professor Robin Grimes, FCO Chief Scientific Adviser
Professor Ian Boyd, Defra Chief Scientific Adviser
Professor John Loughhead, DECC Chief Scientific Adviser

Dear Mr Francis Maude,

We write to express our deep concern about the recently announced revision of the Civil Service Code that requires all civil servants to seek ministerial authorisation for any contact with the media. We fear that this change will prevent scientists who are employed at public expense from responding to the needs of journalists – certainly within the tight timeframes required. We believe this will have a negative impact on the public understanding of science and the quality of the public discourse on some of the most important and contentious issues of our times. We urge the government to think again about this policy and its unintended and undesirable consequences.

Many publicly funded scientific researchers working in arm's length bodies are required to sign up to the Civil Service Code. This change has now left them and the journalists and science press officers who work closely with them fearful that they are unable to speak to the media about their science without prior permission from ministers. Many of these scientists carry out research on issues of profound public interest and concern. Many also work on the brilliant UK research of which the government is rightly proud. Reports from our sister organisations in Canada reveal that a similar change there has had a negative effect on the ability of state-funded scientists to communicate their work, and hence demonstrate its value, and to be held accountable for that research by journalists and the public.

In the past, government scientists and their institutes were wary of dealing with the national news media and fearful of being treated critically by

journalists simply because of their 'government' label. This suspicion about the independence of government researchers undermined their standing as scientists and cast doubt on the quality of scientific evidence and advice to government. However in recent years, efforts by press officers, the Science Media Centre and science journalists have seen more media engagement, growing respect for government scientists and hence more confidence in the advisory process. Government researchers have been playing an increasingly important role in communicating their expertise to the wider public and have been seen to be more open to journalistic scrutiny.

We fear that this new directive, if implemented without exceptions for scientists, will deny the public access to the evidence and the opinions of thousands of publicly funded scientists and will be a huge set-back for those who have striven so hard for greater openness and engagement.

We are not, of course, objecting to the normal rules for pre-election purdah, and we are not arguing that any civil servants should be free to express party political views. Our concern is that this change threatens to suppress the important and highly valued contribution that government scientists can and should make to media coverage of science. The role of publicly-funded researchers in the media is an important part of the recognition by the scientific community of its responsibility to communicate with the public about scientific evidence on important issues of general concern. That culture change has been encouraged by a long line of science ministers including Lord Sainsbury, Lord Drayson and David Willetts, as well as all the recent government chief scientific advisers.

Some five years ago, under the leadership of Lord Drayson (then science minister) and Sir John Beddington (then government chief scientific adviser), the Code of Practice on Scientific Advisory Committees (CoPSAC) was revised to affirm the right of scientists who advise government to communicate their scientific opinions publicly, and this right was incorporated into the [Ministerial Code](#).

The essential principles listed are that:

- scientific advisers should be free from political interference with their work;
- scientific advisers are free to publish and present their research;
- scientific advisers are free to communicate publicly their advice to government, subject to normal confidentiality restrictions, including when it appears to be inconsistent with government policy;
- scientific advisers have the right to engage with the media and public independently of the government and to seek independent media advice on substantive pieces of work;
- scientific advisers should make clear in what capacity they are communicating.

While these revisions of CoPSAC apply to independent scientists advising government, they surely capture a central principle – that government respects and defends the right and duty of scientists to provide the general

public with evidence and expertise.

The UK government should be proud of the role the scientific community now plays in better informing public debate and responding to questions posed to science that were often left unanswered in the past. We have come a long way since the bad old days of the late 1990s where many scientists inside and outside of government were unwilling or unable to engage with the media on such important issues as GM crops, the MMR vaccine and animal research, with profound implications for the quality of media and public debate on those issues, and considerable cost to the government in dealing with misinformation and distrust. In contrast we can today point to debates in the media on similar topics from climate change to mitochondrial donation to fracking, in which scientists have stepped up to the plate and, have enabled some of the best science journalists in the world to deliver balanced, accurate and measured reporting.

We call on you, and all those in government who care about the quality of public debate on science, to think again about this change, and at the very least to issue a clarification exempting scientists from this proscription.

Yours sincerely,



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Martin Ince
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Honorary President
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