



*U of T microbiologist Donald Low heads a new advisory committee on bio-terrorism.*

# RESEARCHERS WITH INFLUENCE

THE TWISTS AND TURNS OF CANADA'S  
ANTI-TERRORISM BILL SHOW THE KEY ROLE  
THAT UNIVERSITY RESEARCHERS CAN PLAY IN  
STIMULATING PUBLIC DEBATE AND FORMING  
GOVERNMENT POLICY

*by Philip Fine*

When the Canadian government began preparing a new terrorism bill in response to the attacks of September 11, the law faculty at the University of Toronto sprang into action. Within weeks, the dean of law, Ron Daniels, and several colleagues had organized a two-day conference for early November with presentations by more than 20 professors, mainly from U of T's law faculty but also from McGill, Queen's, York and other U of T departments. Then the conference proceedings were rushed to print by the University of Toronto Press while Bill C-36 was still before Parliament.

"We knew that if the book came out six months hence, its impact would be significantly reduced," explains Professor Daniels. "We were determined not to have this book be an after-the-fact evaluation of what took place but rather something that would be available to policy makers, and indeed the public at large, to help them navigate this very critical debate on the conflict between freedom and security."

Academics haven't always been known for speed in leaping into the political fray. More often they provide a measured and thoughtful response to public policy years after the fact. But gradually in Canada, researchers are becoming more attuned to policy

makers' needs, while those involved in policy are learning more about the value of university research. Nowadays, policy makers actively seek advice from university experts in a host of areas, from public health to security. And many professors want to stimulate public debate and even feel a sense of civic duty to step outside the university environment into forums where they can have broader, more immediate impact.

In the case of U of T, quick action meant the up-to-date expertise of specialists in criminal law, immigration, security and commercial law was available for legislators and policy makers to refer to in the important debate on security and anti-terrorism policy. The

U of T Press sent copies of the conference proceedings, published as *The Security of Freedom: Essays on Canada's Anti-Terrorism Bill*, to key policy makers, all members of Parliament and all senators. Several U of T law faculty who had presented at the November conference were among the experts who appeared before the Senate committee when it was reviewing Bill C-36.

"My colleagues came back and said several senators had the books on their desks, and noticed that [the books] had been marked up and yellow-tabbed," recalls Professor Daniels. "More generally, we sensed within the editorial pages of the country that the ideas that had been hatched in the conference were . . . contributing to public debate and understanding over the issue. And that was our objective."

#### **Called on to serve**

Quite often these days, academics are sought out by policy makers for their expertise. Soon after the first anthrax-laced letters were opened in the U.S., Donald Low, with the department of laboratory medicine and pathobiology at the University of Toronto, received a phone call from the office of then-federal Health Minister Allan Rock, asking him to head a new advisory committee for the health ministry on issues of bio-terrorism. Although he had "a billion other things to do", Dr. Low immediately accepted the offer.

"Of course, you don't say no," explains Dr. Low, who is also chief of microbiology at Toronto's Mount Sinai Hospital. He's excited by the project, he says, because it brings together experts (many of them academics) from diverse fields, including chemistry, biology, public health and radio-nuclear safety.

His own clinical experience could fill a book of public health emergency case studies, including the time he dealt with a virus so threatening it closed a hospital for a week. He was a member of the Group A Streptococcal Study Group in 1992-93, a year before Lucien Bouchard lost a leg to the disease. The group came up with clear guidelines in understanding the rising incidence of what is better known as flesh-eating disease and helped design a template for public health responses to infectious outbreaks.

Dr. Low says an advisory committee of outsiders is a good way to handle this kind of issue because it can keep its distance from political storms. "We're not part of the government," he observes. "We don't have to respond

to the day-to-day crises."

As well, he says, the university medical community, with its clinical experience, is an important resource for a government that lacks a Canadian equivalent of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta as well as national emergency-response guidelines.

Many government players are recognizing how university research can benefit them. David Viveash, director of the peace-building and human security division in the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, says he finds it useful to meet professors who've



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had time to read academic journals and have important international contacts. His former boss, Lloyd Axworthy (now a faculty member at the University of British Columbia), consulted with several academics before hammering out procedures to phase out land mines. The effort won international accolades both for Mr. Axworthy as foreign affairs minister and for Canada when an international treaty was negotiated.

John Godfrey, a Liberal member of parliament and historian by training, says the one thing he finds hard to ignore is consensus among university researchers. He points to the issue of climate change, where experts in many countries are calling on governments to take action.

#### **Research alliances**

The federal government took a big step towards integrating university research into public policy some six years ago when Jocelyne Bourgon, who then held the powerful post of Clerk of the Privy Council, launched the Policy Research

Initiative. With an annual budget of \$4.4 million, the PRI aims to forge alliances and foment discussion among federal government departments and agencies, think tanks, academia and the private sector with a goal of improving the quality of research that goes into policy making.

Since 1998, the organization has hosted an annual conference on a specific topic, bringing together senior level participants. "A lot of policy people's eyes were opened up to the wealth of resources in the academic world that we need to make effective

use of," says Jeff Frank, a senior advisor with PRI, of the early conferences.

The latest conference, held in early December, brought together more than 850 delegates, including ministers, researchers and CEOs, to discuss four kinds of "communities" – innovative, sustainable, sociocultural and virtual communities. The conferences are important, says Mr. Frank, because "ideas get transferred and eventually filter their way into the policy-making process".

The PRI just launched research projects to speed up and "deepen research" on three emerging priorities – North American linkages, social cohesion and sustainable development. The aim is to integrate the research findings into the policy process. As an indication of its importance, each project is headed by a deputy minister.

The organization hands out awards to researchers, graduate students and media, to recognize the importance of advancing public understanding of a policy issue. This year the award for

outstanding research contribution (sustainable development) went to Ann Dale, professor of science, technology and the environment at Royal Roads University in Victoria, for her book *At the Edge: Sustainable Development in the 21st Century*. The choice of award recipient makes it clear that the PRI welcomes critical research: her book calls the government's response to the needs of sustainable development a "systemic failure".

Dr. Dale, who was formerly a federal civil servant, believes that gathering together people in various specializations as PRI is doing is important for good social policy research. "How can you create policy in a modern society?" she asks. "You're dealing with so many complex issues. No one person can hold such expertise in all these broad issues." She says she rarely saw that kind of intermingling during her years in government, where people were stymied by the hierarchy. And, she adds, universities will risk not having their research applied to real-world problems if they don't begin rewarding cross-disciplinary work.

To be sure, not every researcher who undertakes policy-relevant research will find his or her work actually applied by government. Kevin Gorey has no illusions that he can convince the United States to adopt Canadian-style universal medical care, despite his breakthrough epidemiological work showing that America's poor receive inadequate medical treatment compared with the poor in Canada. The University of Windsor professor realizes that ever since Hillary Clinton failed to get universal health care adopted during her husband's tenure, no politician would try to take a second swipe at the powerful insurance industry for some time. "I'm not so naive to think that even landmark studies will have an effect on policy," he says.

Dr. Gorey expects it could take 15 years before the press releases he sends to American legislators are used to help change the health-care system. Rather, he sees his role as someone who produces knowledge and who should make the knowledge public, informing politicians and trying to influence public policy, even when it doesn't produce immediate results.

Several faculty members who've influenced public policy say the contribution can work both ways: it often gives them something to bring back to their classroom or community.

Mount Allison President Wayne MacKay, one of the country's most

respected constitutional law experts, appeared before the Senate in October to offer a legal analysis of the anti-terrorism bill. He later brought that perspective to two classes, guest-lecturing to Mount Allison students taking courses in political science, and law and sociology.

He also led a public forum in Sackville, New Brunswick, which attracted everyone from bankers to police officers to retirees. One Sackville resident, inspired by the lecture, told him she planned to begin a seniors' discussion group based on the information she'd heard at the forum.



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"Universities are in a good position to act as a useful resource, as a place to clarify complicated issues," suggests Professor MacKay. "And by articulating these public policies, we demonstrate our value."

Another academic who fulfils his sense of civic duty by going public with his research is David Lyon, a sociology professor at Queen's University. He knows it might sound a bit pompous but isn't ashamed to say that he sees himself as a "public intellectual".

"I try to understand, interpret and explain [issues of public importance] historically and comparatively," says Dr. Lyon of his role in society.

Dr. Lyon is heading the new Queen's Surveillance Project, an international collaboration of researchers devoted to understanding how a vast range of surveillance activities carried out by government, police, corporations and employers are transforming society.

The project organized a public conference recently to look at the

federal anti-terrorism bill and how public security comes up against citizens' right to privacy. The conference attracted a diverse group of students, faculty members and ordinary citizens, which pleased Dr. Lyon. "What had always seemed interesting to us was suddenly also interesting to lots of other people."

His research group has links with organizations of every stripe, from publicity rousers to more low-key think tanks. Rather than targeting policy makers, Dr. Lyon is more apt to find the media looking at his work once an important bill is being talked about

by the public. He sees his role bringing together divergent views: "I'm keen on helping to remove fears where there are polarized views."

Not all academics are getting their books out in a week but many are promoting issues important to them. Fraser Mustard, founder of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research, is one of Canada's most successful public policy researchers who can offer some advice to academics eager to play a larger role in public policy. His work on early childhood development and how it affects adult life led to Ontario's Early Years Learning Study, and he also helped design a national child-care proposal that has been championed by the likes of Paul Martin and Mike Harris. Dr. Mustard suggests that researchers who want to get noticed by politicians should put their case in clear, "decoded" terms and bring out an issue the public will rally behind. "Politicians never lead parades," he says. "They only lead when a parade has been created." **UA•AU**