

Ex-Stephen Harper adviser Bruce Carson altered partnership's mandate to improve oilsands image

By Mike De Souza, Postmedia News March 29, 2011 5:42 PM



Bruce Carson, a former top advisor to Prime Minister Stephen Harper, left the Prime Minister's Office in February 2009.

Photograph by: Stuart Gradon, Postmedia News

OTTAWA — A top adviser to Stephen Harper had a \$15 million federal grant at his disposal when he left the prime minister's office in 2009 to head up what was supposed to be a new environmental research partnership involving the University of Alberta, the University of Calgary and the University of Lethbridge.

But according to annual reports released by the Canada School of Energy and Environment, Bruce Carson wound up changing the think tank's mandate, leaving him in the middle of a government and industry strategy to green the image of Alberta's oilsands and delay regulations that would crack down on pollution.

"Under his (Carson's) leadership, CSEE's mandate was re-energized to include a crucial role in the elaboration of public policy on energy and environment as well as informing the climate change debate in Canada and internationally," reads the school's 2009-2010 annual report.

An original agreement among the universities stated the partnership would help coordinate and support research to protect the environment or develop and deploy new technology to help reduce pollution.

Carson has said the role included regular meetings and partnerships with top oil and gas CEOs such as Imperial Oil's Bruce March and Suncor's Rick George to engage the public about the industry's image. It also included special assignments from former environment minister Jim Prentice as an adviser "on all facets of Canada's GHG reduction plan," as well as dealings with Lisa Raitt and Christian Paradis, the former and current ministers of natural resources, according to Carson's online biography.

He was the only employee of the think tank to earn a six-figure salary in his first few months on the job, getting a total of \$139,203 in salary, benefits, relocation and accommodation allowances during 2008-2009, the school's first report revealed.

Carson has taken a leave of absence following a report on the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network that prompted Harper's office to ask the RCMP and two federal watchdogs to investigate Carson's involvement in an Ottawa-based water-filtration company.

But before the news broke, he was meeting regularly with ministers and senior officials in government as several departments worked in partnership with industry on a communications strategy to fight back against criticism and block climate change policies in other countries that targeted energy sectors with heavy environmental footprints such as the oilsands.

"When our product is called 'dirty oil' that really puts me off," Carson told Alberta Oil Magazine in a 2008 interview, shortly after his appointment to the school, following an international recruitment search by the board of directors. "Canada is the most stable supplier of energy in the world and to have groups in other countries criticizing us is something we need to react to."

The same issues were raised in joint meetings that Carson had with bureaucrats and industry officials, according to departmental briefing notes released last week through access to information law. The messages are similar to advice given to the natural resources minister in briefing notes, released last November, to fight "well-orchestrated media campaigns" against the oilsands as well as "restrictive legislative and regulatory proposals that associate oilsands with 'dirty oil.'"

The annual report also said Carson's school hosted a dinner for Paradis with academics and "thought-leaders" to discuss a national clean energy strategy for Canada.

Paradis acknowledged last week that he had spoken to Carson, but the minister's spokesman suggested that Postmedia News should not be asking questions about it.

"Of course, everyone knows Bruce Carson," said Paradis' communications director Richard Walker last week. "I just don't want my minister's name to be dragged into this story in a negative way. There's nothing negative about his involvement or his dealings with (Carson) or at that event. He was there as the minister of natural resources at an event held by the school. That was it."

Carson also participated last March in a meeting with senior officials from Paradis' department, the Alberta government and the oil and gas industry to work on "upping their game" in their communications strategy to boost the image of oilsands companies and fight claims that Alberta produces dirty oil. Last month, Carson spoke with Environment Canada's deputy minister, Paul Boothe, to set up a meeting between department officials and academics to discuss greenhouse gas reduction policies.

Environment Canada declined to reveal which academics participated in the meeting.

Over the past year, Carson was also organizing a series of "dialogues" with CEOs such as March from Imperial Oil. The dialogues were supposed to form the basis of a new report on the oilsands, which Carson was unable to complete. One invitation, obtained by Postmedia News, for an event last September in Vancouver was actually sent in an email from Dave Collyer, president of the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, the main industry lobby group.

The existing climate change policies introduced by the Conservative government would result in Canada's emissions rising nearly 30 per cent above the target set by Harper under the international Copenhagen climate change agreement from 2009, according to Environment Canada statistics. The government has not yet introduced regulations to crack down on pollution from industrial sectors such as the oilsands — which has seen its emissions triple since 1990.

Officials from Carson's school have not returned phone messages and e-mails asking for comment.

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