

English translation

The Currency of Science is Truth

It is strange to keep seeing your own name in news articles. In public I used to be just Jeff Da Costa, researcher in hydrometeorology. I now seem to be ‘The Case of Jeff Da Costa’, or sometimes ‘The Jeff Da Costa – affair’.

For the past two weeks, I have seen my name, and my experiences working in, and being fired from, a hydrological science company become public property. Much has been said and written about me, what happened to me, and what this says about political and social life in Luxembourg.

Many people have asked me what happened, and why I spoke out. Apart from speaking to *Radio 100,7*, who first broke the story, I have not felt I had any more to say. But since I find my name being raised in the Chamber/Parliament, and ‘The Case of Jeff Da Costa’ continuing to grow, I feel it is helpful to highlight my own story, and my motivations.

I began my PhD with Guy Schumann as my supervisor in January 2021. I later joined Guy’s company RSS-Hydro as an employee in June last year. This wasn’t my first position – I studied environmental sciences and meteorology in Canada and the UK, and I had worked as a science teacher, in an administration of the Ministry of Finance in Luxembourg and for a renewable energy company, before returning to research.

I felt that I was in an enviable position – with the security of a job and a salary in my home country, while following my passion for scientific research with some of the best environmental scientists in the world. I was working on disaster risk reduction in the context of severe weather events under climate change, and helping to save lives by improving emergency warning and response systems. My university in Reading, UK, works with the UN the Red Cross, and governments to save lives in flood disasters, and has won awards and honours for it. Floods are already the biggest hazard from nature, and the risks are getting bigger as the climate warms and people are unable to keep themselves safe.

When flooding came to Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg in July 2021, and my parents’ own home was one of the properties inundated, my university press office encouraged me to speak up. I duly wrote an article for *The Conversation* – a UK news site featuring articles by academics. That led to interviews with broadcasters in Europe and journalists worldwide.

My main points were the same: that it was clear that something had gone wrong with flood warnings across Europe. The focus was on Germany, where nearly 200 people had tragically died – but in Luxembourg too, the warning system had not worked. When I was asked if the government had failed, I responded yes – that the systems in place were inadequate, and that many improvements were required.

I was busy, and appearing all over the media. My employer and PhD supervisor Guy Schumann was pleased. He asked me to make sure RSS-Hydro was mentioned whenever I did an interview. The interest continued over the summer. In September *RTL* asked to interview me for TV, asking me about the floods and how people and the authorities had reacted. Again, I said I thought the government had failed to prepare for the floods, and had responded

inadequately when they came. Once again, Guy congratulated me. Within a few days, his attitude had changed.

I was due to attend a conference in Dubai alongside the Chamber of Commerce. Shortly after being fired, I was told not to come. Sitting outside a café in Luxembourg city, I saw MP Dan Biancalana, who I knew to be not only an MP but also mayor of the town that manages our office building. Someone from his entourage raised his eyebrows when he saw me and described me as “the one who is badmouthing us” whereas he (Biancalana) kept telling me that the use of the word “failure” was not good as it would stick with the population.

Guy told me, in text messages, phone calls and in person, that he was facing political pressure to distance himself and RSS Hydro from my criticism of the government. In one phone call, he told me that the pressure was coming from many areas in the government, including from as high up as Franz Fayot. This is just what Guy told me. I have never said Fayot pressured me about anything.

After telling me I could not attend a staff meeting, Guy came to my office and said he would have to let me go. I did not resign. I was fired. He said the political pressure was too great. I do not know who spoke directly to Guy. I do not know if the political pressure on him was real, or imagined.

I had liked Guy. He is a good scientist. But when faced with a difficult situation he showed himself to be lacking courage.

I wanted him to have some courage, no matter what people were saying to him. As a boss, I wanted him to stand up for his employees. As a scientist, I wanted him to stand up for his convictions. This is not just because I wanted to know that my boss had my back covered. It is because I believe science can only work if scientists are able to inform the public and those in power about what they see and think.

After losing my job, I had lost my security, my income, and with it, the ability to pay for my studies. I moved to the UK, where my university helped to cover my tuition fees, and I found a short-term part-time job on a climate research project, separate to my own research to afford to live here.

Since *100,7* broke the story about my being fired, I have not appeared on TV or radio. Many people have contacted me, and I have told them my story. Some people think I am motivated by politics, or profit, or publicity. I'm not. I have no job in Luxembourg, but I am continuing my PhD research into disaster risk reduction and improvement of warning systems from Reading. I will talk to anyone who I think is serious about preventing flood disasters.

As a researcher, I see the effects that floods have on communities and people. They are devastating. Usually the people most at risk are in parts of the world where poverty or inequality means people have no choice, or no information about how to keep themselves safe. In Europe, our relative affluence should mean we can afford to prepare for the unexpected. But we cannot afford poverty of thought. We need to grow up and admit our mistakes, or we will not learn. That's how good science works.