



Canada is in need of serious access to information reform

31 March 2014

Canada's access to information (ATI) system is in crisis. It is taxing on those who administer it, the process of obtaining information is unnecessarily lengthy and cumbersome for users and it results in far too little information being made public. In short, our ATI system is failing the Canadians it is intended to serve.

The undersigned civil society organizations from across the country are extremely concerned with the problematic state of our current system. The Access to Information Act, which came into effect in 1983, is in desperate need of review and updating. Created before the adoption of the Internet, social media, and the numerous digital tools and technologies now prevalent in our daily communications, the Act is woefully out of date and cannot address current and future production, storage, and dissemination of information realities.

Access to information held by public authorities is a critical aspect of democracy. It enables the citizenry to make educated decisions, to participate in decision-making processes and to hold government accountable for its actions. Without an effective system to ensure adequate access to information and to guarantee government transparency, our democratic system is seriously undermined.

Today, the Information Commissioner of Canada, Suzanne Legault, tabled a report in Parliament entitled, "Striking the Right Balance for Transparency: Recommendations to modernize the *Access to Information Act*." At over 100 pages in length, and containing 85 different recommendations, the Report is a robust assessment of the current system and provides a useful roadmap for starting a broad public consultation on how to update the Act to better serve Canadians and streamline processes for public authorities.

It is long past time for the Act to be reviewed and updated. Once a world leader in ATI, our country now lags far behind. Canada is currently ranked 57th out of the 101 countries on the Centre for Law and Democracy's Right to Information Rating, a comparative assessment of right to information laws from around the world. While other countries modernize their ATI policies and practices, the Canadian system is becoming increasingly outdated and ineffective. Until we take action to address the system's shortcomings, we will continue to fall further and further behind.

Access to information is critical to any functioning democracy, and has been neglected in this country for far too long. We, the undersigned organizations, call on the Canadian government to initiate a holistic and comprehensive review of our access to information system, using the Commissioner's recommendations as a starting point, with a view to adopting an updated ATI Law, among other things, within a reasonable time frame.

Yours sincerely,

British Columbia Civil Liberties Association
BC Freedom of Information and Privacy Association
Canadian Association of Journalists
Canadian Civil Liberties Association
Canadian Journalism Foundation
Canadian Journalists for Free Expression (CJFE)
Centre for Law and Democracy
Democracy Watch
OpenMedia
PEN Canada
Right to Know Coalition of Nova Scotia