

To the Right Honourable Stephen Harper, the Honourable Thomas Mulcair, Mr. Justin Trudeau, and Ms. Elizabeth May,

The deficit of trust between Canada's voters and its elected officials has never been higher, largely due to a breakdown in the system of accountability. Key to this is the fact that, after years of neglect, Canada's access to information system is in crisis. The undersigned organisations are calling on the main political parties in Canada to make concrete commitments to reform Canada's access to information system.

A strong access to information system is vital to maintaining a healthy democracy. Elections depend on the ability of individuals to understand how government has performed and the background to policy decisions. Journalists and civil society rely on requests for information to monitor public bodies and to uncover malfeasance. Vital oversight functions are curtailed in the absence of an effective right to information system. The current system is failing Canadians.

Our country deserves an open and accountable government. We call on all political parties to make a clear electoral promise to undertake a comprehensive process of consultation leading to reform of the Access to Information Act and to express specific support for the rapid adoption of the following four reforms after the election:

1. **Strengthen the Information Commissioner:** Grant the Office of the Information Commissioner (OIC) order-making power and expand the OIC's mandate to include promoting the right to information.
2. **Eliminate loopholes:** Repeal all blanket exclusions from the Access to Information Act and amend the regime of exceptions so that they apply only where release of the information would pose a real risk of harm to a legitimate interest set out in the Act. Also, make all exceptions subject to an override, whereby information will be released if its disclosure is in the overall public interest.
3. **Expand the scope of the Act:** Extend the Access to Information Act to apply to all public authorities, including ministers' offices, the Prime Minister's Office and Cabinet, and other bodies which perform a public function or receive significant public funding.
4. **Document decisions:** Commit to requiring public officials to document and preserve records of their communications and decision-making, regardless of the medium of communication.

Canadians of all political stripes want honest and transparent government, and have spent decades waiting for a government willing to deliver it. We urge all parties to endorse these four reform commitments, and to support a comprehensive review of the Access to Information Act in the aftermath of the election.

Signed,

British Columbia Civil Liberties Association (BCCLA)
Canadian Association of Journalists (CAJ)
Canadian Journalists for Free Expression (CJFE)
Canadian Taxpayers Federation (CTF)
Centre for Law and Democracy (CLD)
Centre for Social Justice
Evidence for Democracy
Fédération professionnelle des journalistes du Québec (FPJQ)
Freedom of Information and Privacy Association (FIPA)
Greenpeace Canada
International Civil Liberties Monitoring Group
PEN Canada
Politics of Evidence Working Group
Newspapers Canada
Open Media
Right to Know Coalition of Nova Scotia
Voices-Voix

How has Canada's access to information system fallen by the wayside?

- A [ranking of the world's access to information laws](#) by the Centre for Law and Democracy rated Canada 59th globally. This is down from 51st place just three years ago, as more and more countries leapfrog ahead of us.
- A [recent study](#) by the Toronto Star of 28,000 access to information requests revealed that 57 per cent of all data released was censored in some way, and 18 per cent could not be found at all.
- In [some cases](#), government departments have told Canadians they would have to wait more than a thousand days for a response to their access to information request, well beyond the 30 days set out in law.
- Last November, Information Commissioner of Canada Suzanne Legault warned that an increase in the number of complaints to her office had led to a [critical shortage of resources](#). Rather than offering more funding, MPs suggested increasing the price of filing a request for information, in order to discourage use of the system.

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