



You Can Handle the Truth!

The Campaign for Open Government

PRESS KIT BACKGROUND

For immediate release

Tuesday, September 26, 2006

Contact: Matt Smith, 778-881-6114 or media@opengovernment.ca

The Campaign for Open Government (COG)

The Campaign for Open Government is a coalition that includes organizations from the full spectrum of politics and issues. The unifying principle is that all members demand that the government of BC fulfil its promise to be open and accountable by updating BC's Freedom of Information (FOI) act and reforming the problematic way it is being administered.

The Campaign for Open Government is a constantly growing coalition, currently made up of the following groups:

BC Civil Liberties Association
BC Coalition of People with Disabilities
BC Freedom of Information and Privacy Association
BC Government and Service Employees Union
BC Health Coalition
BC Library Association
BC Trial Lawyers Association

Canadian Association of Journalists
Canadian Office and Professional Employees Union
Canadian Taxpayers Association
Committee for Racial Justice
Sierra Legal Defence Fund
UBC School of Journalism
Western Canada Wilderness Committee

The Act under Attack!

Since 1995, both NDP and Liberal administrations have responded poorly to FOI requests, and have tried to restrict the reach of the FOI Act. Since being elected in 2001 on a promise to be "the most open and accountable government in Canada", the BC Liberals have:

- Cut the budget for the BC Information and Privacy Commissioner's Office, who oversees FOI and ensures the government responds properly to FOI requests;
- Excluded BC Liberal caucus meetings from the FOI Act;
- Tried to exclude public-private partnerships from the FOI Act;
- Allowed a "culture of denial" to fester in Victoria that involves government staff engaging in tactics to avoid FOI request and dissuade FOI requesters;
- Extended reply times to FOI requests and created loopholes to delay releasing information;
- Begun flagging requesters viewed as not supportive to the government. These requesters usually face longer delays in receiving information requested; and
- Have ignored the recommendations on a 2004 Special Committee of the Legislature that would greatly improve and strengthen the Act.

After spending fruitless years trying to work with the current Liberal administration, the members of the Campaign for Open Government have decided to engage in this campaign. We will not stop until we achieve our goals.



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Campaign Goals

1. Implement the recommendations of the 2004 Special Committee of the Legislature on the FOI Act.
2. Restore adequate funding to public bodies that respond to FOI requests and the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner who oversees those responses.
3. Reform the BC government's "culture of denial" towards freedom of information requests.

Relevant Quotes:

"The fundamental principle must be this: government information belongs to the people, not to government. This means, among other things, that all citizens must have timely, effective and affordable access to the documents which governments make and keep."

– Gordon Campbell, 1998 letter to FIPA

"Information rights are meaningless if disclosure timetables cannot be met because there aren't enough staff to do the job, or if fees become an obstacle to access."

– Gordon Campbell, 1998 letter to FIPA

"...cuts to the budget for our public sector oversight duties continue to negatively affect our ability to provide effective and timely oversight. This year we have experienced the first noticeable backlog of files." He continues that, "In light of the significant case backlog we now have, and the increasing delays involved in doing our work, I am concerned that we are not properly discharging our duties to the public and that the OIPC needs more resources to deal with increased workloads and to ensure we provide the timely and diligent oversight the public has the right to expect of us."

– Information and Privacy Commission of BC 2004/2005 Annual Report

"Amend the Act to provide a mechanism for the enforcement of the Commissioner's orders as orders of the Supreme Court of British Columbia."

– Special Committee to Review the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, Report, 5th Session, 37th Parliament, May 2004

"The overarching purpose of access to information legislation, then, is to facilitate democracy. It does so in two related ways. It helps to ensure first, that citizens have the information required to participate meaningfully in the democratic process, and secondly, that politicians and bureaucrats remain accountable to the citizenry"

- The Supreme Court of Canada, 1997 decision