



Just the Facts: The War on Public Info

GOVERNMENTS ARE MAKING IT HARDER TO GRADE OUR GOVERNMENTS.

- Good government is government that is:
 - Democratically accountable. This means that the government should be open to scrutiny (transparent) and constructive criticism, and willing to take responsibility for its past actions and future plans
 - Evidence-based. Governments should make policy decisions that will “work”, and that will not be a waste of time and money
- Good government depends on good information. This means information that is:
 - Reliable and politically neutral. In a quote attributed to the great American Democratic senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan: “Everyone is entitled to their own opinion; they are not entitled to their own facts”
 - Public--information gathered by the government on behalf of the people and accessible to the people. There is some information that only governments have the authority, power, and resources to collect. It is vital that the public have access to the information that is being collected in their name and supposedly for their benefit
- Without good public information, we have no way of knowing our needs as a people, and if the government is doing a good job of meeting them. We have no way to assess existing policies and programs or the need for new ones
- Academics, researchers, activists, businesses, and local and provincial governments depend on data from Statistics Canada and the national census. They use this data to measure things like economic growth, inflation, poverty, and greenhouse gas emissions, and to track how well government programs are working. The vast majority of the information in our Grading our Governments presentations and fact sheets is ultimately based on this data
- In the 1990s the influential English magazine *Economist* twice named StatsCan the top national statistics agency in world
- During its reign the Harper Government has radically changed the federal government’s ability and willingness to gather, analyze, and share public information
 - The mandatory long-form census was cancelled in 2010 (in the name of privacy)
 - StatsCan’s budget was cut by almost \$30-million, its staff cut by nearly 20% (in the name of saving money)
- The real aim of these changes was not privacy or cost savings, but to deliberately undermine the ability of future governments to assess existing programs and/or create new programs
- These cuts have hurt existing programs and services.
 - As a result of the census changes, we have much less information about income inequality and poverty (especially in rural and remote areas), labour markets, immigration, and public health. Public and private-sector organizations are turning to less accurate and more expensive private surveys (which themselves depend on StatsCan data and techniques), or using the 2005 census results rather than the 2011

- StatsCan had to retract its Aug. 2014 employment report because it overestimated job losses. The inaccurate numbers led to ½ cent US drop in the Canadian dollar
- February 2015. Liberal MP Ted Hsu (a retired physicist) introduced a private members bill to reinstate the mandatory long-form census, but it was defeated by the Conservative majority in the Commons before it could be fully debated
- In his 2014 book, *Kill the Messengers: Stephen Harper's Assault on Your Right to Know*, journalist Mark Bourrie describes in detail how Harper's communications staff controls and micromanages how government scientists and other government employees communicate with the public. The control is especially tight on issues re climate change, oil sands
- In 2013 Index on Censorship (an international watchdog group founded in 1972) took a survey of 4,000 federal government scientists. Only 14 per cent said they felt they would be able to share a concern about public health and safety, or a threat to the environment, without fear of retaliation from their department
- In 2014 the watchdog group Evidence for Democracy graded the media policies of the federal government's science-based departments based on openness and lack of political interference. The average grade was a C-, lower than the average for comparable US departments. Industry Canada and Natural Resources Canada got F (fail)
- As a result of a recent change to federal government policy, Environment Canada meteorologists are not allowed to comment to the public/media about climate change, or on whether a particular weather event is linked to climate change
- "There are multiple ways to avoid using scientific evidence in policy development. One way is to not collect it and get rid of historical documentary information" Katie Gibbs, biology PhD & former Green Party activist
- The budget of the National Library & Archives has been shrunk. Some services have essentially been privatized to the for-profit Ancestry.ca. Employees have been issued a "Code of Conduct", stressing their "duty of loyalty" to the "duly elected government". All "politically sensitive" information requests are to be sent to the Cabinet and Prime Minister's Office. A researcher's efforts to view the RCMP's files on Tommy Douglas were largely unsuccessful until the journalist went to court. (The files showed that the RCMP security services monitored Douglas for almost 60 years, and continued to monitor him long after he left politics)
- Due to Harper government cutbacks to research funding, the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, which has issued a highly-regarded and much-cited survey of early childhood education and care since the early 1990s, has had to resort to a crowdfunding campaign to continue its work
- Further evidence of the Harper government's hostility to public information is its abuse of the parliamentary process through frequent use of omnibus bills, private members bills, and closure motions.
 - An omnibus bill lumps together in one single bill a large number of changes to a large number of existing, often unrelated laws. An omnibus bill is generally long and complicated. Important, potentially controversial changes are buried in fine print. The Harper government was not the first to use omnibus bills, but it has used many, despite the fact that before he was Prime Minister Harper was very critical of omnibus bills on grounds that they were undemocratic
 - Private members' bills: introduced by an "ordinary" MP rather than a Cabinet minister. These don't pass unless the government party (with its majority) decides to vote for them. Less time is allocated to debating and analyzing these bills than to "government bills" (bills introduced by a Cabinet minister). Private members bills can be used to pass controversial measures with relatively little debate, and less accountability for the government

- Closure motions: these are motions to cut off debate in Parliament. The Harper government has made more use of these motions than any other government in Canadian history

The Sask Party government: no great friend of public information

- A leading Saskatchewan policy analyst criticized the Sask government for doing too little to speak out or lobby against the Harper government's census changes
- ISC Privatization: For generations, the Saskatchewan government has gathered information on land titles, corporations, and personal property loans in publicly-accessible registries. These registries protect us as citizens by enabling us to answer such questions as:
 - Who actually owns this land/house/car I'm thinking of buying? Is there an unpaid mortgage, loan, or tradesperson's bill associated with this property?
 - Who actually owns this company I'm selling to/concerned about?

In 2013, Information Services Corporation (ISC), the Crown corporation that ran these registries, was privatized by the Sask Party government. Since then, the ISC has laid off staff. Saskatchewan's Information & Privacy Commissioner expressed concerns about ISC's privatization, e.g. what happens to the info if the now-private company goes bankrupt, or if it contracts with offshore companies?

- According to the Information and Privacy Commissioner, "When it comes to access and privacy, Saskatchewan is still a have-not province." There has been no real progress on these issues during the Wall government's time in power: government has resisted or stalled on too many access requests, and refuses to supply the staff needed to process the growing number of access requests

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Take action! Use this information to write your MLA, MP and/or any other person in power that you think can use your concerns to take action and ensure that government collects and shares the information we need to hold governments accountable. Get out in the community! Activists for democracy and access to information can always use more support. Spread this information to everyone you know – communication and awareness is highly effective in building more support.

For further information about this topic, including the sources of this fact sheet, please contact Karman Kawchuk, Research Officer, SEIU-West by email karman.kawchuk@seiuwest.ca