

INFORMATION COMMISSIONER RAISES ALARM ABOUT JOB AD, DESCRIPTION

*By 680news.com
September 12, 2006*

OTTAWA (CP) - The fix may be in for a candidate to replace Canada's information ombudsman, warns the man who currently holds the job.

John Reid, the outgoing information commissioner of Canada, raised the alarm Tuesday, saying a recently posted job notice strongly suggests the Conservative government wants to fill the coming vacancy with a senior bureaucrat rather than someone more independent.

"Although it appears to be what the government is seeking, a bureaucrat is the last thing Parliament and the public need as their information commissioner," Reid said in his last official speech.

Reid, who's scheduled to end his term Sept. 29, noted the Privy Council Office posted the job vacancy on an obscure government website on the Friday before the Labour Day weekend, and allowed just seven days for interested citizens to deliver their applications. The web posting has since been removed.

"The notice of vacancy was not published in the Canada Gazette, nor was it published in the national press," said Reid, who has frequently clashed with prime ministers and civil servants bent on withholding information.

The job description also appeared to be tailored to the most senior levels of the federal bureaucracy, he said later in an interview.

"It's basically for a deputy minister," he said. "I can't think of anyone who would come from the private sector."

Reid, a former Liberal MP and cabinet minister who later worked in the private sector, said even he would not qualify for the position as advertised, nor would his predecessor, John Grace.

Information commissioners, who serve seven-year terms, are officers of Parliament whose role is to investigate - and sometimes go to court - when departments and agencies decline to release material requested under the Access to Information Act.

The act allows anyone in Canada to ask for information from federal government files for a \$5 application fee, though there are many loopholes that allow files to be withheld. Complaints to the commissioner's office are free.

"I am shocked and surprised," freedom-of-information advocate Darrell Evans said of the recent job posting process.

"The process is obviously being manipulated by somebody."

Evans, who works for the B.C. Freedom of Information and Privacy Association, said it appears the deck is stacked. "One would have to conclude . . . that they have a candidate in mind."

Any nominees for the job must be vetted by a Commons committee, though it remained unclear whether a single candidate will be put forward to accept or reject.

Stephen Owen, a Liberal member of the committee, said he was not aware of the Labour Day weekend job posting.

"If we're going to fill these types of positions with the best possible person, it should be widely advertised and not narrowly circumscribed in terms of background," he said in an interview.

Owen said he knows qualified candidates who had wanted to apply. "I hope they haven't missed the cut-off date."

Reid said he sent e-mails around last week alerting potential candidates to apply once he learned about the obscure web posting.

A replacement is unlikely to be appointed before Reid steps down at the end of the month, but he has offered to remain in office until the new commissioner takes up the post.

Spokesmen for the Privy Council Office and for the prime minister were not immediately available for comment.

Source: <http://www.680news.com/news/national/article.jsp?content=n091267A>