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Harper government backs off on promises to increase transparency

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The Freedom of Information and Privacy Association (FIPA) is deeply disappointed in the new Conservative government's failure to deliver on its election promises to increase federal government transparency.

The Conservative platform contained eight firm commitments to "Strengthen Access to Information legislation" (See below). In the Federal Accountability Act tabled in Parliament today, only one of these promises is implemented, and even that one has been compromised.

The only reform of note to the Access to Information Act was the addition of seven crown corporations and three foundations to the Act's coverage. This brings the total of federal government institutions covered to 59 out of an estimated 250. The pledge to extend the Act to the remaining institutions has been referred to a parliamentary committee for review.

"Evidently special interests and Ottawa's bureaucratic machinery took no time at all to get to the new kids on the block", said Darrell Evans, FIPA's executive director. "But we will do all we can during any committee process to remind the new government of the commitments they made to the people of Canada."

Key promises to "Implement the Information Commissioner's recommendations for reform of the Access to Information Act", and "Give the Commissioner the power to order the release of information" have also been referred for review to committee – a move that many FOI advocates fear is the "kiss of death". Parliamentary committees have been a wasteland for ATIA reform, with almost nothing accomplished from reviews over the last 20 years.

"As we emerge from the malaise created by the sponsorship scandal, it's clear that swift and tough reform of the Access to Information Act is needed to change the secretive culture of Ottawa, " said Evans. "Delay can only weaken the Conservatives' commitment to transparency."

The Tory platform to Strengthen Access to Information Legislation:

=> Implement the Information Commissioner's recommendations for reform of the Access to Information Act.

=> Give the Information Commissioner the power to order the release of information.

=> Expand the coverage of the act to all Crown corporations, Officers of Parliament, foundations and organizations that spend taxpayers' money or perform public functions.

=> Subject the exclusion of Cabinet confidences to review by the Information Commissioner.

=> Oblige public officials to create the records necessary to document their actions and decisions.

=> Provide a general public interest override for all exemptions, so that the public interest is put before the secrecy of the government.

=> Ensure that all exemptions from the disclosure of government information are justified only on the basis of the harm or injury that would result from disclosure, not blanket exemption rules.

=> Ensure that the disclosure requirements of the Access to Information Act cannot be circumvented by secrecy provisions in other federal acts.