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Wants Curb On Concealment

A Commons bill to expand Canadians' access to government records will reform the role of the Commissioner of Information from a mere ombudsman, says Liberal leader Justin Trudeau. The MP sponsored a bill to compel agencies to release public documents without first having to be sued in Federal Court.

"The information commissioner is sort of an ombudsperson right now; she can't actually decree that something be involved," said Trudeau, MP for Papineau, Que. "If she wants one of her recommendations obeyed, she needs to take government to court to get it released."

Bill C-613 *An Act To Amend The Parliament Of Canada Act* reverses the onus on federal agencies, requiring that they seek a court order to conceal records. It also restricts closed-door hearings by the Board of Internal Economy, a parliamentary committee that reviews legislators' budgets and spending.

In an interview, Trudeau said the information commissioner "spends an awful lot of time in negotiations back and forth and mounting court challenges to get things released, and a lot of time fighting against a system that has become resistant to *Access To Information*."

"If you turn it around for senior civil servants it makes a big difference, that it be open by default," Trudeau said. "It lightens the load and the fighting the current information commissioner has to do against a system that is defaulting toward opaqueness rather than transparency."

Information Commissioner Suzanne Legault in her last *Annual Report* to Parliament noted for the first time that most *Access Act* requests are being filed by the general public compared to corporations, attorneys and media. Legault cited numerous agencies for conduct that appeared to thwart the law.

"How Canadians can find out more about what government is doing is not a partisan issue," Trudeau said. "All parties support it. This government got elected on a platform of openness and transparency. There is no ideological opposition to this."

"It's time that we had statutory reviews," the Liberal leader added. "We went as far as we possibly could with this bill, but we will of course be open to amendments, to suggestions, to debate. These are things that we should be able to agree on."

The information commissioner cited the Treasury Board for ignoring one request for information for seven months, though a reply is required within 30 days under the *Access To Information Act*. Transport Canada was cited for giving itself an 18-month extension to release information by claiming time for "consultations" that never occurred. And VIA Rail was found to conceal information on passenger volumes at train stations, though VIA had published the data on its website till 2010.

By Dale Smith 🇨🇦 🇨🇦

