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## NEWS ELECTION 2015

### 2015 Election campaign to be longest, most expensive: insiders

By **ABBAS RANA**

If Prime Minister Stephen Harper sticks with the fixed election date of Oct. 19, the next election campaign will be the country's longest and most expensive as the unofficial campaign already underway will go into high gear around June when all parties start to run attack ads and initiate other election activities that will continue until election day, say political insiders.

"All the parties are just going to go crazy with the advertisements. They're going to do as much as they can before the [writ is dropped]," Keith Beardley, former deputy chief of staff to Prime Minister Harper (Calgary Southwest, Alta.), told *The Hill Times* last week. "It's almost like [the Conservatives'] standard operating procedure. They saturate the airwaves as much as they can [pre-writ], do as much damage and essentially put a frame around the opposition leader. Now the other parties are on

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## NEWS ELECTION 2015

### Three candidates jockeying for Tory nomination in Ottawa West-Nepean

By **ABBAS RANA**

Three candidates have been feverishly preparing behind the scenes to win the Conservative Party's nomination in Ottawa West-Nepean, Ont., hoping to hold on to the hotly contested seat in the upcoming election since popular incumbent John Baird is running in another riding.

Andy Wang, 27, a staffer in Democratic Reform Minister Pierre Poilievre's (Nepean-Carleton, Ont.) constituency office and Scott Singer, a local restaurant owner, told *The Hill Times* that they're running for the Conservative Party nomination. Ottawa Police officer Abdulkadir Abdi, currently on secondment with the RCMP, is also said to be entering the race and is already signing up new members.

The nomination meeting has yet to be scheduled, but in interviews last week, Mr. Wang and Mr. Singer told *The Hill Times* that they are signing up new members and they're receiving a positive response in their interactions with people in the riding.

Mr. Wang, who holds a bachelor's degree in economics and political science from McGill

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## NEWS BUDGET & ELECTION

### 'Given the current market instability, I will not bring forward our budget earlier than April': Joe Oliver



Finance Minister Joe Oliver, pictured last fall, told the Calgary Chamber of Commerce last week that he would not table the federal budget before April because of the instability caused by plummeting oil prices. It's especially important for a Conservative government that has branded itself as a sound economic manager to demonstrate prudence in a period of uncertainty, analysts said, but the changing economic outlook could also hurt it most. *The Hill Times* photo by Jake Wright

### Budget delay buys Tories time for messaging but balancing won't get easier, experts say

By **MARK BURGESS**

The Conservative government is buying itself some time with a delayed budget, hoping for oil prices to rebound as a once highly-anticipated election surplus budget is looking harder and harder to balance, potentially damaging the government's brand.

But there's no guarantee the outlook will improve in the next few months and the Conservatives could be hurt after tying their brand as strong economic managers too closely to a balanced budget, experts said.

"You never do get certainty with these things, no matter how long you wait," said Don Drummond, a former senior Finance Department official and TD executive who's now at Queen's University. "If the catalyst is the oil thing, this is not going to play out over the next little while. It's extremely volatile."

Finance Minister Joe Oliver (Eglington-Lawrence, Ont.) told the Calgary Chamber of Commerce last week that he would not table the federal budget be-

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## NEWS MEDIA

### Access to information laws need reform, say authors of how-to book

By **LAURA RYCKEWAERT**

Canada's access to information laws are the "ultimate form of democracy," but they were designed in a pre-digital age with too many rules to allow governments not to disclose information quickly, if at all, and badly need to be modernized, say two veteran Hill jour-

nalists who just published a book on the subject.

"Information is power but the government doesn't make it easy to get. This is a very important law. There are laws like this around the planet now, and Canada is really slipping in terms of our efficiency,"

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## CIVIL CIRCLES DEFENCE

### DM shuffle likely to mean slow progress on DND procurement

By **MARK BURGESS**

Changes to senior public service positions dealing with defence procurement are a further signal not to expect movement on major projects before the next federal election, insiders say, as bureaucrats need time to get up to speed on their new files and the Conservatives will avoid drawing attention to a potential weakness.

The government announced a contract with Irving Shipbuilding last week to begin construction on the Arctic patrol ships that had long been promised. The \$3.5-billion deal, an increase from the original \$3.1-billion price tag, is for five ships with a possible sixth depending on costs. The project was first announced in 2007.

But defence insiders said there likely wouldn't be movement on major files until after the federal election.

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## NEWS EXPENSES

### MPs spent almost \$52-million in first half of 2014-15, expense reports show

By **LAURA RYCKEWAERT**

MPs spent almost \$52-million during the first half of the 2014 fiscal year, according to new quarterly expenditure reports, but one MP is questioning whether the cost to produce more of these reports is worth it.

Independent MP Massimo Pacetti (Saint-Léonard-Saint-Michel, Que.), one of the lowest spenders so far this year, said the \$3.8-million cost to put together the quarterly expenditure reports is "absolutely not" worth it.

"I don't think anybody has a problem with disclosure. It's just, is it worth it?" he said. "I think it's a debate that should probably be had, to see how much extra this whole thing costs and what is the benefit."

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Drop in oil prices spells trouble for the status quo.

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Canada's lack of true satire isn't funny

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## NEWS MEDIA

# Access to information laws need reform, say authors of how-to book

‘This is a citizen’s guide to freedom of information,’ said Jim Bronskill. ‘It walks people through what I think can be an intimidating process: the idea of using laws and filling out forms. I mean, it’s not fun, so we’ve tried to make it easy and accessible for people.’

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said David McKie, senior reporter with CBC’s Parliamentary bureau and a part-time journalism instructor focused on reporting research methods and data journalism.

‘There have been a lot of promises to make things right and a succession of information commissioners have really fought for reforms and they’ve been rebuffed by Liberal and Conservative politicians alike.’

Mr. McKie and Canadian Press reporter Jim Bronskill, have authored a new book, *Your Right to Know: How to Use the Law to Get Government Secrets*, a step-by-step how-to guide for filing access requests.

Any Canadian citizen can file an access to information request, and it’s easy to do: fill out a form and send it off with \$5 attached. Getting it right, and following through, can be hard, the authors said.

‘It’s not difficult to file a request but it takes a bit of persistence and patience and commitment to see it through,’ said Mr. Bronskill, a long-time reporter with The Canadian Press who covers national security issues and also teaches a Reporting Methods course in Carleton University’s master’s journalism program alongside Mr. McKie, who also teaches at Algonquin College and King’s College in Halifax, N.S.

Published by Self Counsel Press in December, *Your Right to Know* is a slim, 128-page step-by-step practical guide for filing access to information requests.

It’s packed with information: taking readers through the history of the act, related laws and rights (like the right to complain), how to write a request, the importance of follow-up and keeping track of a request, a review of the exemptions and exclusions allowed under the act, and other tips and tricks, such as piggy-backing on already-filed requests.

The book also includes scanned examples of real-life access requests, acknowledgement letters, and subsequent follow-up and responses for readers to reference.

‘This is a citizen’s guide to freedom of information,’ said Mr.

Bronskill. ‘It walks people through what I think can be an intimidating process: the idea of using laws and filling out forms. I mean, it’s not fun, so we’ve tried to make it easy and accessible for people.’

Mr. McKie agreed, saying it’s a tool not only for journalists but also for the general public. ‘This is the ultimate form of democracy,’ he said.

Introduced in 1982, Canada’s federal Access to Information and Privacy Act has seen few changes since, despite repeated calls for major reform from successive federal Information Commissioners and commitments from successive federal governments.

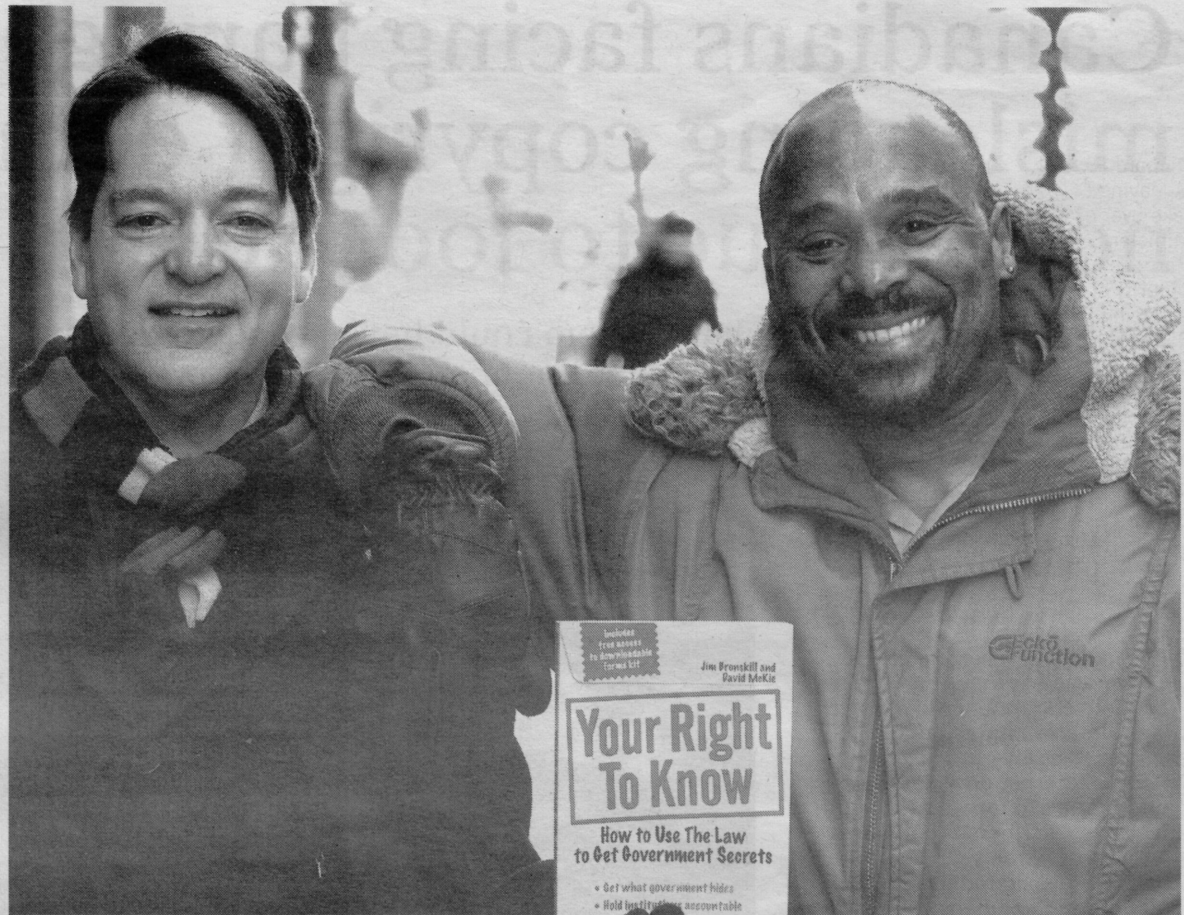
‘The Conservatives like to say that they added a number of Crown corporations that are covered by it and they included the ‘duty to assist’ [in fulfilling a request], but that’s it, many of the substantive reforms that information commissioners have been pushing for have not seen the light of day,’ said Mr. McKie.

Perhaps you’ve heard the horror stories: years-long delays in responding to requests, hundreds of pages of entirely redacted information being shipped out in response to a request. In one case last year, an access to information request response received by a journalist had the word ‘Canada’ redacted from ‘Government of Canada.’ While departments are now shifting towards online access to information requests, in many cases requests still have to be sent through snail-mail.

Mr. Bronskill said the biggest change he’d like to see is an ‘attitudinal shift’ on the part of the government that ‘recognizes the spirit of the existing law, that information should be released by default,’ and said there should also be incentives—or even disincentives—for departments to ‘actually meet’ timelines and impose ‘very short extensions, if any at all.’

‘[The act] was designed in the era of filing cabinets and pre-internet age, so people’s expectations about transparency and the ability to get information quickly don’t mesh with this law,’ said Mr. Bronskill.

In terms of recommendations for improvement, Mr. McKie said



Veteran reporters Jim Bronskill, of The Canadian Press, and David McKie, from CBC’s Parliamentary bureau, pictured recently on Sparks St., teamed up to pen a practical, step-by-step guide on Canada’s access to information system, titled *Your Right to Know: How to Use the Law to Get Government Secrets*. The pair teach a master’s journalism program course together on ‘Reporting Methods’ at Carleton University. *The Hill Times* photograph by Jake Wright.

the ‘biggest one’ is reducing the number of exemptions that can be used to withhold information. He said the government should also start routinely disclosing ‘certain kinds of records,’ like briefing notes or media response lines, redacted as required per the legislation.

‘What’s really frustrating is you’ve got an access to information committee [in the House of Commons] that spends its time basically bashing the CBC and not really looking at ways that the act itself should be improved,’ said Mr. McKie.

‘I’m not saying the CBC is beyond bashing, but to me, if you’re looking at access to information, there are a lot of legitimate issues, I think, that are to be raised.’

Successive federal Information Commissioners have called for changes to the exemptions and exclusions allowed under the act—in addition to a long roster of other changes. Current Information Commissioner Suzanne Legault, who penned a foreword for Mr. McKie and Mr. Bronskill’s book, is expected to table a new report with recommendations on modernizing the Access to Information Act by the end of this fiscal year, but she’s already repeatedly called for a wide range of changes to the act, including recommending penalties for institutions that fail to respond to requests within ‘prescribed timelines.’

Recently, the Conservative government has been focused on promoting its ‘Open Government’ initiative, spearheaded by Treasury Board President Tony Clement (Parry Sound-Muskoka, Ont.), the minister responsible for administering the Access to Information Act. Mr. McKie said they felt it was an ‘opportune time’ to raise awareness about the Access to Information Act and to educate people about how to use it.

The government’s final plan for its open government initiative for 2014-16 makes no recommendations to change the Access to Information Act, despite the Con-

servative government’s 2006 election platform including promises to introduce sweeping reforms.

*Your Right to Know* is now available online, and the pair say they’ve had conversations with professors, including one at the University of Ottawa, interested in including the book as part of their syllabus.

Former CP journalist and recent Vancouver mayoral candidate Kirk Lapointe is editor-in-chief for Self Counsel Press. It was Mr. Lapointe who approached Mr. Bronskill with the idea of writing the book in March 2014. Working with his fellow Carleton instructor, Mr. McKie, was a logical next step.

Over their careers, both Mr. Bronskill and Mr. McKie have earned a reputation for being access to information experts—they prefer the moniker ‘experienced practitioners’—having broken a number of important stories through access requests, which they both file on a regular basis.

Mr. McKie said one of his earliest access requests was for information on Health Canada’s adverse reaction database, which ultimately led to Health Canada making the database public. Mr. Bronskill has also broken many stories from access requests. The pair worked together in 2008 to report on the RCMP’s use of tasers, using access to information requests to get records on past use, which earned them a Michener award that year.

Filing access requests requires patience, discipline, time and a lot of grunt work, both said—including finding time to carefully parse through responses and ‘decoding them.’ They said the biggest challenges they’ve encountered in filing access to information requests are dealing with liberally applied exemptions, exclusions and delays.

‘There are too many excuses the government can give you to not release information,’ said Mr. McKie.

There is such a thing as a bad access request—asking for ‘all records’ on a broad issue with no timelines included, for example, is a

bad request, said Mr. McKie. There’s an onus on those filing requests to understand the law, including finding out what types of documents and information are produced by a given department, he said.

Departmental access to information coordinators can at times be treated with suspicion. But Mr. Bronskill and Mr. McKie stressed that these coordinators are required to help access filers under legislation, and that there’s a separation between them and the actual department that holds the information.

The act is not ‘broken,’ both say—but it does need to be improved.

‘If you follow the steps in the book you can really make it work for you,’ said Mr. Bronskill. ‘It’s staying on top of the process that is important.’

Asked whether there was a need for a book like this, Josée Villeneuve, director of public affairs at the federal Information Commissioner’s office, said generally, there’s a lack of awareness among the public when it comes to the right of access.

‘The act does not expressly allow the commissioner to educate Canadians about the right of access,’ said Ms. Villeneuve. Allowing such public education is a change the commissioner has repeatedly called for.

‘At present, there are limited tools or resources to help Canadians acquire the skills needed to know how to exercise their rights. As noted in the forward, the guide will be a valuable resource or tool in that regard,’ she said in an email to *The Hill Times*.

‘[The Access to Information Act] needs a complete overhaul to adapt the law to today’s realities, to harmonize the legislation with the most progressive and current national and international standards and to ensure that the government will be able to meet its stated open government objectives and commitments to foster transparency and accountability.’

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