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NEWS

Veteran Muckrakers Write the Book on How to Access Gov't Secrets

After all, says duo McKie and Bronskill, it's 'Your Right to Know.'

By [Jeremy J. Nuttall](#), 10 Jan 2015, [TheTyee.ca](#)



David McKie and Jim Bronskill at a local Parliament Hill spot.

A few blocks away from Parliament Hill in Ottawa, at a coffee shop at Sparks and Metcalfe streets, is where it seems the real schmoozing is done as far as government business goes.

Most of the customers are well dressed with briefcases, making it easy to suspect them as civil servants. The parliamentary ID tags around their necks are a stone-cold giveaway.

The spot is also where veteran investigative journalists David McKie and Jim Bronskill came to talk with The Tyee about their new book, *Your Right to Know: How to use law to get government secrets*.

The guide is aimed at teaching the public the skills to get the information that many sipping their java at Sparks and Metcalfe already know.

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"It's a citizen's guide," said Bronskill. "This is a tool that, more and more, average people are using and that fascinates us."

The duo also hope it will have an impact on the public's interest in access to government information and "create an expectation" for government openness.

Bronskill is based in Ottawa as a national reporter for the Canadian Press while McKie is a national producer with CBC News based in the organization's Parliament Hill bureau. The two co-teach a course in the Carleton University journalism school on reporting methods.

They often assign their students the task of pursuing a story through access to information legislation and would love to see the general public doing so too, much more frequently.

"Our hope is that once they realize how important and essential this, they will start making demands of their politicians," McKie said. "To put pressure on the powers that be to change the system to make information easier to get, to make a basket of records more routinely released."

Access laws 'should be a last resort'

That pressure would also hopefully involve forcing bureaucrats to write down more information, which the duo said has been on the decline since the Somalia inquiry in 1993 where Canadian soldiers killed a Somali teen. The scandal led to the discovery of serious problems in the country's military via government documents.

Bronskill said access laws should really be a last resort, and that individuals should be able to ask for information from government and get it back the same day, which is

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Though *Your Right to Know* is aimed at the public, there is a special section for journalists. McKie said the number of reporters who actually use access to information infrastructure is quite small.

"I would suggest, respectfully, that for a lot of journalists it's not second nature," McKie said. "Journalists are among the most infrequent users (of ATIP)."

He said many journalists who do use the system don't use it well -- such as asking for too broad a group of records -- and they could gain an edge on their competition if they did.

The pair said sometimes the information gained can be useful to journalists in the future, so it shouldn't be discarded once used. -- *Jeremy Nuttall*

currently not the case.

Obtaining government records can be a time-consuming and costly endeavour, depending on the level and department. Some governments charge an initial fee for filing an access to information request, but it's the fees governments charge to search for the records that can really add up, and even scare a citizen out of pursuing their request.

Fees can range in the thousands of dollars because the government says the resources used for the searches must be paid for by someone. But

Bronskill said if the government made much of the information public to start, the resources wouldn't have to be strained.

"Ideally all government information, within reason, would be available for the asking. It would be online; minutes of meetings would be posted regularly, every bit of expense report you would want to see is posted," Bronskill said. "Then you'd see the number of (ATIP) requests go down."

But the most important part of the process, the pair agreed, is that a person carefully

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reads the records they receive, or else there's not much point in fighting to obtain them.

"You have to make demands if you're not getting what you want," McKie said. "If we all just threw up our hands and gave up on it, the government wins, and we're stuck with the system that we deserve." 🐾

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Jeremy J. Nuttall is The Tyee's Parliament Hill reporter in Ottawa. Find his previous stories [here](#). This coverage of Canadian national issues is made possible because of generous financial support from our [Tyee Builders](#).

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The Tyee

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Bruce • 24 days ago

The problem today is we have a Provincial Gov. That does not write anything down, if it's not in writing it can not be read. So having an open Government policy means nothing .

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Mary • 23 days ago

And what do we do when the department refuses to provide it? I have submitted FOIs to BC Hydro and they refuse to even respond to some of my questions. When I've complained to the Privacy Commissioner who is supposed to force responses are provided, I was told to complain to Hydro, there is nothing they can do. Also, what if the response is incomplete or false? No one holds the government to account. I'd like to know what the veteran muckrakers would do about this-- really I would.

5 • Share ›



HumeanView • 24 days ago

Entirely agree. The opaque nature of access laws pose systemic problems. Empowering Canadians with knowledge and awareness can help make relevant information transparent, as well as bring light to the issue. An additional reader is "Brokering Access" edited by Mike Larsen and Kevin Walby.

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HumeanView · 23 days ago

Agree, to an extent. Yes, there have been changes to strategies, which, in addition to writing less, there include newer forms of redaction, cc-ing lawyers, and other forms of withholding information. So, yes, there ought to be amendments to practices and policy, which should include a strengthened oversight agency. However, there continues to be important information obtained from ATIPS or FOIs, which includes information that helped expose the Liberal 'ethnic vote scandal' in BC. Thus, accessing government information continues to play a helpful tool for transparency

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