

B.C. sticks to six-year path of secrecy

BY DARRELL EVANS

"All citizens must have timely, effective and affordable access to the documents which governments make and keep. Governments should facilitate access, not obstruct it."
Gordon Campbell, 1998.

When a citizen or group is seeking the unvarnished truth behind government secrecy and spin, the Freedom of Information Act is often their last and best hope.

Much too often, the attitude of government insiders echoes the words of Jack Nicholson as the arrogant general in *A Few Good Men* when he snarled "You want the truth? You can't handle the truth!"

The 38 groups behind the Campaign for Open Government beg to differ. We say, not only do citizens want to know the truth behind government actions, they have the right to know — and should refuse to settle for less.

Officials have a hundred ways to

hide embarrassing facts from the public. They can "lose" them completely, reveal only part of them, spin them — or they can lie outright. That's why FOI acts have been passed by every modern democracy: To give citizens the right of direct access to government documents.

And that's why, when they were in Opposition, the B.C. Liberals were the biggest single user of the FOI act.

This isn't the first Campaign for Open Government. That was launched in 1998 when the NDP under Glen Clark took an axe to the FOI system, politicizing the process, raising multiple barriers to FOI requests and cutting the staff that answered requests to less than a skeleton crew.

At the time, Gordon Campbell said he'd change all that. He wrote to express "enthusiastic support for the Campaign for Open Government" and committed his caucus to enhance the rights enshrined in the Freedom of Information Act, "...ensuring that resources are available so that all provincial public bodies are able to

meet or beat statutory disclosure timetables." (See the letter at www.opengovernment.ca.)

How drastically things have changed. It seems that freedom of information, which the Liberals loved so well in opposition, is to be feared and loathed now that they are in power. Obstructing access has become business as usual for the administration. Here are just some of the things they have done since 2001:

- Passed 16 amendments that have made the FOI process more difficult and time consuming — but not one amendment that has improved the process for requesters.
- Failed to restore the huge FOI staff cuts made by the Clark government. Currently, each FOI officer is handling an estimated 25-30 files when 10-12 would be optimum. As a result, more than 40 per cent of requests for general (non-personal) records are not answered within required timelines, and delay skyrockets when a request is considered politically sensitive.
- Slashed the portion of the Informa-

tion and Privacy Commissioner's budget available for oversight and enforcement of the FOIP Act by 35 per cent between 2002 and 2005. Some funding has been restored recently, but funding for FOI is still not back to 2002 levels.

- Extended cabinet secrecy to several Liberal caucus committees — a step without precedent in B.C. history.

- Removed B.C. Ferries from the scope of the act and refused to include Vanoc, the Olympic organizing committee.

- Initiated a highly secretive review of the FOI act by bureaucrats in 2005 which produced no written report and excluded any group who refused to sign a confidentiality agreement.

- Failed to respond to urgent calls from the Information Commissioner and a special committee led by MLA Blair Lekstrom to clarify the highly abused section of the FOI act relating to policy advice.

- Attempted to pass a bill in 2006 that would have exempted designated contracts and projects with govern-

ment's private-sector partners from FOI requirements.

- Have routinely used excessive fees in order to dissuade FOI requesters. For example, the Environment Ministry attempted to charge the Sierra Legal Defence Fund \$173,000 for data on polluters that was provided for free by the previous government. The Information Commissioner found the fee unreasonable and noted that the ministry did not even examine the requested records before making its estimate.

When elected, Premier Campbell pledged his administration would be "the most open, accountable and democratic government in Canada." It's an understatement to say the Liberals have been a disappointment.

The Campaign for Open Government will continue to grow and hold the premier to account for failing to provide citizens with the access he said is their right.

Darrell Evans is with the B.C. Freedom of Information and Privacy Association.

LETTERS

Lawns no boon to environment

A letter writer claims that green lawns are good for the environment since they remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

What about the greenhouse gases produced by the gas lawnmowers that many people continue to use? What about the trees that are lost when the reservoir needs to be expanded to provide all that water?

Grass may remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, but it is a very short-term cycle. Every time you cut your lawn, the grass clippings decompose and release greenhouse gases back into the atmosphere.

Trees, with their greater biomass, are much more effective at sequestering carbon. Maintaining artificially green lawns in a climate with a very dry growing season like Victoria's doesn't make a lot of sense.

Rob Maxwell,
Victoria.

Langford shows efficient water use

Re: "Stop watering those public spaces," letter, June 25.

Since 2000, the City of Langford has taken enormous steps in wise use of our water resources. Many of the parks and boulevards utilize efficient drip-irrigation systems, eliminating water runoff and promoting healthy plants.

Where feasible, the city has installed wells to provide an alternative water source. Many of these wells are located within the downtown core and supply water to boulevards along Goldstream Avenue, Veterans Memorial Parkway and sport fields at Centennial Park.

The city is constantly looking for opportunities to implement new technologies and improve the efficiency of our irrigation systems.

Lillian Szpak,
councillor,
CRD water commissioner,
Langford.

Smoker penalized, addicts get free kits

I am a non-smoker. As of July 1, Larry Lunchpail can no longer enjoy a smoke and a pint on the patio of his favourite pub — a patio built by the owner at some expense a few years back to conform to the then Capital Regional District smoking regulations. Tobacco, whatever its damaging effects, is a legal, widely distributed product.

On the other hand, Harry Hophead can get a free needle kit so that he can shoot up with whatever illegal substance is in vogue, a product that, more than likely, he is paying for by breaking into Larry Lunchpail's truck and stealing his CD player.

Bruce Thom,
Victoria.

WEST COAST TRAIL



Lighthouse on the West Coast Trail near Port Renfrew. Publicity about rescues could lead to more bridges and more barriers, a writer says, lessening the wilderness experience.

Times Colonist

Rescue stories send bad signal

Re: "Edmonton visitor describes harrowing fall from bridge on West Coast Trail," June 26.

Here we are just starting July and already we've had two West Coast Trail rescues reported. Considering the trail sees about 50 emergency evacuations a year, I suppose we can expect another 48 such stories this summer.

I'm not sure why every time a hiker gets lost or hurt it makes national news. What this story didn't say is that the section of the West Coast Trail where the couple required rescue is about the simplest and best-marked portion of the 75-kilometre trail. Getting lost here and finding a derelict bridge to fall from is quite an accomplishment.

The earlier rescue this year involved about the most dangerous portion of the trail. But the same principle applied — the hikers were either not prepared for or ignorant of the risk, in this case it being waves at a surge channel near Owen Point. And for this we had a CNN helicopter circling the scene.

Parks Canada does a wonderful job of warning hikers of the risks at mandatory orientation sessions.

But I'm sure every one of this year's 50 rescues could be easily avoided, given

the proper care and experience. My concern is Parks Canada will take these instances as reason to add more boardwalks, more bridges and more barriers, taking the trail farther from its intrinsic appeal as a wilderness trail.

And in the end it's a futile cause because dumb hikers will continue to do dumb things.

I'd sooner see Parks Canada have a requirement that hikers have previous experience on an overnight wilderness trail before being allowed on the West Coast Trail.

As someone who spends a great deal of time in Vancouver Island's wilderness, should I ever require (knock on a hiker's wooden head) a rescue, I'd like to ask you a favour. Instead of writing about it as a drama about a "harrowing fall," please write it from the perspective of the bone-headed errors I made to get me there so someone might actually learn something useful from my mistake.

John Kimantas,
(author, *The Wild Coast*)
Nanaimo.

Hiker praises emergency teams

I have been following with interest the stories in the TC relating to rescues from

the West Coast and Juan de Fuca Marine trails.

I was rescued after a fall close to the Bear Beach section of the Juan de Fuca Marine Trail this month, suffering a broken ankle and torn ligaments. Luckily my friend and I were able to reach 911 service via cellphone. Despite the fact we were only a 20-minute hike from Highway 14, there was no chance of my being able to make it out unaided.

After a couple of hours, individuals from the B.C. Ambulance Service at Port Renfrew, the Juan de Fuca ground search and rescue and Sooke search and rescue arrived to assist me. I was carried by stretcher out from the trail, no easy task for the team, and taken out to the waiting ambulance for transport to Victoria General Hospital.

After a three-day stay at hospital and a plate being placed in my ankle, I am now at home recovering.

I just had to write to let everyone know about these fantastic individuals who are on standby to assist hikers and other outdoor enthusiasts when accidents happen. I cannot praise them enough for the wonderful work they do and the concern they show for the injured. We are all the richer on the island for having individuals like them among us.

Bill Rae,
Saanchon.

WORKING Employers overlook older job applicants

Re: "Prospective employees get picky in tight market," June 26.

The job market in Victoria is not what it appears to be. After searching for work for three years, and despite significant qualifications, I have been rejected for what at times can only be described as bizarre reasons.

I've been told, "you are too qualified for the job." Can anyone believe that a person is too qualified to be allowed to work?

In one instance, the prospective employer argued that I wanted too much money.

This was before money had been discussed and after I had made it clear that I was aware the job was different than much of my previous work experience.

One part of the article is a little at odds with my experience.

Employers suggest they want a mature person, but when the hiring choice is made, maturity is held against a candidate.

I actually had one prospective employer send me an e-mail suggesting that the reason he would not hire me is I was too old.

When challenged, the response suggested "older people" are stupid and lazy, a considerable insult, especially as they had not met me and had my age wrong.

I am not the only person experiencing a problem dealing with age discrimination; many people significantly younger have also been able to report similar experiences.

There is no labour shortage in Victoria.

There is a reluctance on the part of many employers to give a person over 45 a chance.

Norm Ryder,
Victoria.

SEND US YOUR LETTERS

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