

The push for Open Government - up to a point

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Ottawa's six-week consultation period (which included Christmas and New Year's) on "open government" ends on Monday. A good question is: what came out of this call for feedback about how to make government more "accessible to Canadians"?

Interested parties were invited to make submissions to the open government [website](#). But the bonus, and by far the most attention-getting element, was [a Twitter town hall in December](#) hosted by the President of the Treasury Board Tony Clement. While some participants marvelled about how many were joining in, one tweet seemed to sum up the chat: "Great effort w/ #opengovchat but limit of 140 characters and ideological bullying limiting the debates potential."

Vincent Gogolek of FIPA, the B.C. Freedom of Information and Privacy Association, uses the phrase "shiny gee-gaws" to describe an event like this. "Everyone thinks it's so cool that the minister tweets, and talks about 'crowdsourcing' and other techie buzz, but, it's like the government's saying: Look at the shiny new gee-gaw that we have here, and ignore the smell coming from the access to information system."

As far as access to information goes, it's mostly a non-starter on the open government website, other than the fact that summaries of completed ATI requests are now posted there.

And the government hasn't implemented most of the [reforms](#) it promised for Canada's 30-year-old outdated access to information law, which included giving the

Information Commissioner more powers and enshrining an override that public interest be put before government secrecy.

During the Twitter town hall, Vincent Gogolek tweeted a suggestion to the effect that minister's offices and staff should be under the ATI act. "Oddly enough they were quiet on that. Now Tony Clement, he's a busy guy, he can't respond to everyone."

Nothing is more crucial to open government than a country's commitment to access to information. Internationally, access to information is beginning to be recognized as a human right, as a part of freedom of expression.

But in Canada, says John Hinds of the Canadian Newspaper Association, the culture seems to be: "We have to jump through hoops to get information, rather than endorse the idea that information should be available and the law should be a last resort."

There's a plethora of other voices that have found fault with Canada's access to information legislation.

In September the Information Commissioner Suzanne Legault [appeared](#) before the parliamentary committee dealing with access to say that over the past 10 years there's been a steady decline in the timeliness and disclosure of information by federal institutions. She was asked by an opposition member whether the minister's office and staff exemption (for ATI requests) creates a "black hole" for documents. "Yes, I think that is a major risk," Legault said.

In its annual [audit](#) of Canada's freedom of information system, the Canadian Newspaper Association gave the federal government a grade of D for timeliness of disclosure, and a C for completeness of disclosure.

Compared to some provinces, this was "one of the worst performances" according to the report.

What does this say about the push for open government [announced](#) by Stockwell Day a year ago? Gogolek says, "It's going to be in terms of platforms, in data sets, things it can do very easily."

Already, more than a quarter-million data sets have been [posted](#) online, the stuff of trivia games and information lovers everywhere. There is, for instance, a registry of all Canadian civil aircraft, as well as a history of federal ridings since Confederation. This kind of document dump, according to Gogolek, is useful for data-miners or app developers.

And no-one's saying this release, if not deluge, of information is a bad thing.

Tony Mendel of the [Centre for Law and Democracy](#) says the push for open government is, "what I would call the soft side. So they're pushing government to put more stuff online proactively, to make it available in user friendly formats.

"That's all great and it has a lot of economic and social value. The hard side of it is the request side of access to information. There, we have not seen any interest from the government in amending the access to information line."

A report on the findings of the public consultation will be published on the open government website in March.

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/inside-politics-blog/2012/01/the-push-for-open-government-up-to-a-point.html>