

*Private Members' Business*

There are a few catches that the Liberal government failed to mention when it introduced the new guidelines. It failed to mention that the government still has the ability to keep some poll results secret. It is able to do so if the individual minister feels the results would be injurious to the public interest or to federal-provincial relations. That seems to give the ministers room to impose total personal discretion. What one cabinet minister may see as injurious to public interest may be necessary information to the average Canadian.

Mr. Kenneth Rubin, an expert on government documents, called this ethics package "so vague it is hard to criticize it precisely, but the specific rules for withholding polls are what the Tories practised". This vagueness is a blessing only for cabinet ministers as they are able to interpret it to their own benefit.

Another benefit to cabinet ministers and their friends in the polling companies is that they are given 90 days to release poll publications, which is an absolute absurdity. After 90 days the issue is likely dead and Canadians have little interest in old news or dead issues. Also quite often the government has already used the information to its advantage by this time.

The 90-day period of silence is stretched even further as often the polling companies give the government a verbal or a brief written synopsis of the results. There is no requirement to release poll results until 90 days after the government receives the final written report. This in reality can add months to the 90-day period. The information commissioner in his annual report in June called this "a loophole of monumental proportions".

Even then, if the 90-day period is not long enough, the minister can still apply to have it extended indefinitely. In effect a minister can sit on an issue as long as he or she chooses. The government can also use the extended period provision to avoid criticism and legal action. Once the government has decided to release the poll results the poll is no longer open to further scrutiny under provisions of the Access to Information Act. That means any right to complain to the federal court about information quality or delays is no longer an option.

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If all this security is still not enough for cabinet ministers, they have even more ways of ensuring the Canadian public does not receive poll results accurately. They can instruct their friends at the polling companies to provide only summaries of the results and leave the real meat and bones of the research in the technical tables.

Another creative method of avoiding the public is that the government can purchase omnibus polling packages from companies that are providing them to other organizations as well.

These poll results then remain the property of the polling company and do not have to be made public, even though government money paid for this information.

Bill C-309 responds to all these loopholes by offering a straightforward method of dealing with the publishing of poll results. It requires the ministers to submit polls to the House of Commons no later than 15 days after the poll is completed. If the House is not sitting the report must be submitted to the information commissioner, published in the *Canada Gazette*, and presented to Parliament upon its return. This is simple logic and is democratic. Bill C-309 eliminates all the vagueness that allows the government to abuse the system.

The information commissioner wrote in his 1995 annual report: "The Liberals promised to do better than the Conservatives, much better. Many Canadians thus anticipated a new government with the self-confidence to be candid". In my opinion, it is quite clear that this government is no more candid than the former government. This is not merely my opinion. The information commissioner, who is an expert in the field, agreed when he added in his report that "expectations for a bright new day with sunshine in all the old dark places were unrealistically high". The information commissioner is clearly not satisfied with this government's commitment to openness. Canadians are not satisfied either.

The information commissioner and the Reform Party are not the only ones that are not content with the government's lack of commitment to open government. The *Ottawa Sun* criticized the government accurately last fall when it stated: "Who knows, one of these days the government might even poll you for your opinion on whether it should be forced to release the results of all its opinion polls. Tell them what you think, just don't ask them for the results. You might be told it's none of your damn business".

It is the business of Canadians to know what questions and issues are being polled. Canadians deserve the right to know what is the popular opinion of the nation. They deserve to know what the government is doing with the results it receives. They deserve to know if the government departments are polling for legitimate reasons or for the government party's own political gain. Finally, Canadians deserve the right to see how much money is being spent by the government and for what reasons.

**The Acting Speaker (Mr. Kilger):** Colleagues, I find myself in a situation we all do from time to time. I know the practice is not to recognize people in the gallery. However, I would want the group from St. Timothy Catholic School to know that if I could recognize them I would, but it is not our practice to do so.

**Mr. John Bryden (Hamilton—Wentworth, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, that was very well done, if I may say.