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Canada mediocre in access to information rankings

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Staff Reporter

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The world's first-ever access to information rankings are in, and Canada finds itself languishing in the middle of the pack.

In a [ranking](#) of all 89 countries that have access to information laws, Canada placed 40th. The modest ranking is largely due to Canada's aged legislation: the Access to Information Act hasn't changed much since 1983.

"Canada has gone from being one of the world leaders in this area to a middling country," said Michael Karanicolas of the Centre for Law and Democracy, a Halifax NGO that created the rankings with Madrid group Access Info Europe. "As other countries modernize, our ranking is going to slip further."

Canada scored 85 points out of a possible 150, tied with Montenegro and Estonia. Scores were compiled using seven categories such as right of access, scope, sanctions and protections, and appeals.

"Canada's lax timelines, imposition of access fees, lack of a proper public interest override, and blanket exemptions for certain political offices all contravene international standards for the right of access," the study said.

Analysis focused purely on legislation and not its implementation, Karanicolas said. That work focuses on implementation for five. On his list, the top spot, with a score of 107



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made for an unconventional top five: Serbia took the top spot with a score of 137, followed by India, Slovenia, El Salvador and Liberia.


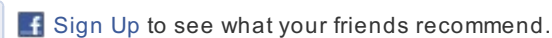
“Countries that have had recent experiences with dictatorships or quasi-dictatorships tend to safeguard the right to information much more carefully,” Karanicolas said. “You could make an argument that the reason why those countries are at the top is because they need those kinds of laws.”

Germany came in last place, and 15 of the bottom 20 countries are European. Most of them have older laws that are more limited in scope and have weaker appeals mechanisms.

Canada’s information commissioner Suzanne Legault, whose office investigates complaints about federal institutions’ handling of access requests, said the study’s findings don’t surprise her.

The commission is starting a review of the legislation that will lead to a recommendation to Parliament, she said.

“We need to look at our law . . . and the analysis that this group has done is going to be a really useful tool.”

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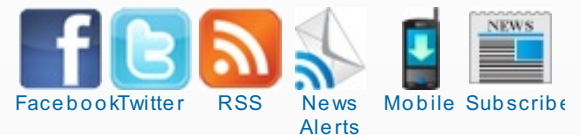
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