

FOI requests decline in BC

EARSON GIBSON
The Ubyssy

VANCOUVER (CUP)—Fewer people are making freedom of information requests, response times are steadily increasing and access to politically sensitive information is becoming more difficult to attain, according to a study from the BC Freedom of Information and Privacy Association (FIPA).

The study, entitled *Access Denied: an analysis of the BC Government's response to freedom of information requests, 2000–2005*, was conducted by the non-profit organization and sponsored by the Canadian Newspaper Association and the BC Government and Service Employees Union.

"We're here to hold the government's feet to the fire," FIPA's executive director Darrel Evans said. "[The results from the study] mean that it's getting more and more difficult to get access to government information."

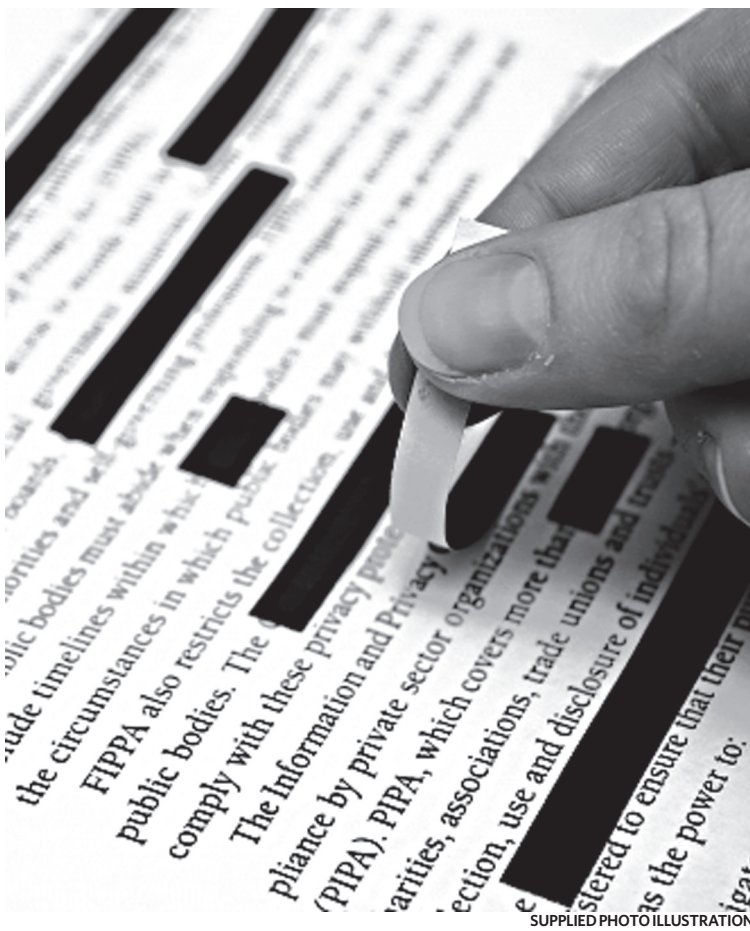
Evans explained that exactly what information is difficult to access depends on the government's Corporate Privacy and Information Access Branch—the body that determines which freedom of information (FOI) requests are flagged as "sensitive." These requests take longer to process and are more likely to be characterized as what the study calls "deemed refusals."

"There are a lot of deemed refusals, which simply means that the government doesn't respond in the time the legislation says they must and that's directly attributable to loss of staff within the Ministry," Evans explained.

Aside from time delays, the study also found that 65 per cent of survey respondents were charged a fee to access documents and that 31 per cent had abandoned a request because a fee was charged.

"Higher fee estimates are given now. I'd say that because most of them don't stand up to appeal, they're really just a vexatious tactic to discourage requesters," Evans said.

The Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner is



BLACKED OUT AND RED TAPE Bureaucracy and fees hamper FOI requests.

independent of the government and acts as an advocate and watchdog for the public. If a citizen is not satisfied with the final response to an FOI request, the Commissioner can review the file and order a hearing.

But according to Evans, the Liberal government has steadily cut funding and resources to the OIPC since 2001. Between 2003–2005 the Commissioner's caseload had increased by 27 per cent, while his budget was cut by 35 per cent. The result, Evans said, was the OIPC's first-ever backlog of cases, with 189 carried over into 2005.

"We are now very concerned about our ability to adequately discharge our statutory duty to provide this arm's-length expert advice and support to public bodies across British Columbia," Commissioner David

Loukidelis was quoted as having said in the FIPA study.

FOI requests expert Kirk LaPointe said the legislation is in need of reform and changes in implementation.

"In many cases governments not only don't live up to the letter of the law, but not even to the spirit of the law," LaPointe said.

But LaPointe said he thinks people will eventually demand more transparency and access to information.

"[With a decrease in FOI requests] there will be a threat to our safety that we don't learn about, a scandal that we're not privy to, something substantial that the government has been hiding," he predicted. "At the moment we're not in the mood to rattle the cage of government ... but these things have a way of going in cycles."

Students survey course evaluations

JESSICA McDONALD
The Fulcrum

OTTAWA (CUP)—Students unhappy with the methodology of professor evaluations can now have their say in a survey being distributed by the Student Federation of the University of Ottawa.

The five-minute survey examines the potential demand for a new evaluation system, posing questions on the current system and on support for an independent course-evaluation process that would share results with students.

The SFUO explained that it's displeased with the survey conducted by the University Administration. And, according to the SFUO, the biggest concern is that students' comments are only seen by their professors.

"I understand the comments can't be published because some of the comments can be libel, but it should go to the [professor's] supervisor," said SFUO Vice-President (Academic Affairs) Julien de Bellefeuille. "Positive or negative comments keep on getting repeated and nothing changes."

But Robert Major, U of O Vice-President (Academic) and Provost, is concerned that if students receive too many surveys, fewer will respond,

ultimately lowering the credibility of any results.

The University is sensitive to what is called survey fatigue. The more surveys there are, the less the students tend to respond," Major said, adding that he's concerned about the section of the survey that deals with course evaluations.

"I think the more information students can get, the better. We like to have as many sources as possible."

**ANDRÉ BRAZEAU,
SFUO PRESIDENT**

"There is a system of evaluations at the University which already deals with course evaluation," he said.

During the winter semester of 2005, the Political Studies Student Association (PSSA) distributed its own professor evaluations in political studies courses. And according to de Bellefeuille—who wasn't working for the SFUO at the time—it was unsuccessful due to a conflict with the evaluations already in place.

"Basically, when students were answering the University one, we encouraged [them] to fill [the PSSA's] out instead, or along with the University's, and the University shut it down and really weren't happy with it," de Bellefeuille said.

But for Robert Leclerc, U of O President of the Association of Professors, it was a matter of the surveys being repetitive.

"To say we shut [the survey] down is not correct," he said. "If I recall what did happen, the PSSA had their own survey based on their professor's performance, and ... we already have one that's been in place for many years."

"The general message is: we have different surveys and questionnaires on providing performance evaluations to teachers, and I think to have more than one survey—it would be confusing to students," Leclerc later added.

However, SFUO President André Brazeau said the student-run survey's intention was to see what kind of participation it could generate and to see how students felt on certain subjects.

"I think the more information students can get, the better. We like to have as many sources as possible," Brazeau said.

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