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HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

Tony Clement
Confederation Building Room 278
House of Commons
Ottawa Canada K1A 0A6

November 18th 2014

Re: Conservative government bankrupting the Office of the Information Commissioner

Minister Clement,

I am writing you regarding the crisis in access to information that has occurred under your government's watch. Despite your upbeat talk about creating "open" government, all indicators appear to show Canada's access to information system departmental delays getting worse, extensions getting longer, and material being cited as excluded more often. The Information Commissioner's office has recently stated that the system is "busting" and Canada's access to information is ranked 55th in the world. Now, we find out that the Commissioner's office is near bankrupt.

While I found the Commissioner's report on political interference into the access to information system at PWGSC troubling, I wonder if there is not more than one possible type of political interference into the system. Starving the system of funds amidst a growing Conservative government culture of secrecy appears to be an effective method to deteriorate an individual's right to access information and thereby limit government accountability. Delaying release of documents beyond their relevance whether through direct action or through a broken system, has major political implications for democratic accountability.

The Information Commissioner has stated that the office is almost broke- threatening the access to information system. Since 2009 the Commissioner's \$11.2-million budget has decreased by 9 per cent while complaints have risen steadily- 31 percent in 2013-2014 following a 9 percent increase in 2012. At the end of the last fiscal year her office had just \$37,000 left or 0.2 percent of her overall budget.

What was missing in your recent Open Government announcement is more important than what was included. You rejected the consensus from the Commissioner, public consultations, experts, and even your own advisory panels for the need to update the Access to Information act as part of your open government plan. The Information Commissioner said that updating the act is one element that must be included in an open government plan.

Instead you stated that this 32 year old law last amended before the internet in 1985 " *is a good piece of legislation*" and that " *we are proud to play an important role in leading our citizens into the next stage of the global information age.*" Your applause for the current state of a broken system that is in tatters and a government withholding information from Canadians is as astounding as it is cynical.

The Conservative Party hasn't always been so oblivious to the need for accountable government and the need for reforming the access to information system. The Conservative party once promised reforms that New Democrats support to modernize the act by giving the Commissioner the power to compel documentation and the ability to review your government's abuse of the process of cabinet confidences. We put a bill forward in Parliament with these promises that your government rejected.

The Conservative Party used to understand that the government shouldn't be hiding documents for political reasons- arguably the most important information for the public to see. You have gone from the party promising more access to actively restricting it.

Everyone but this Conservative government is in agreement that the Access to Information Act needs to be reformed. This Conservative government needs to stop hiding from Canadians.

The first step would be to meet with the Commissioner's office and immediately provide her the resources that her office requires to fulfil her mandate and protect Canadians rights. With coming salary increases, the Information Commissioner stated that, "*without additional funding, I will no longer be able to carry out my mandate responsibly and ensure full respect of Canadians' rights of access to information. As such, I intend to seek the support of the Treasury Board to obtain the necessary financing.*"

I hope that I will hear that you have resolved this issue forthwith. As always I would be more than happy to meet to discuss these issues.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Charlie Angus".

Charlie Angus
MP Timmins-James Bay