

Off to a bad start: Treasury Board already wants to make access to information worse

Ken Rubin, Hill Times online January 8, 2026

With Treasury Board once again handling the first stage of the ATI review, you can be sure of more delays, more exemptions proposed, and more people being excluded from using access to information. Treasury Board President Shafqat Ali shouldn't sign on to his officials' disastrous draft discussion paper that would make for a more dysfunctional access-to-information system, writes Ken Rubin.

Treasury Board officials announced last June that they were still very much in charge of the first stage of the access-to-information (ATI) review. That was after several concerned groups and individuals urged Treasury Board President Shafqat Ali to ensure the federal ATI review be overseen by an independent panel—not the government—to avoid a conflict of interest.

But, alas, more than six months after Treasury Board announced they would lead an inspection, there has been no public start, although internally—as was discovered via an access-to-information request—they had put together a kick-off discussion paper.

However, as uncovered and reported by freedom-of-information expert Dean Beeby, the severed draft discussion paper the department wanted its minister to release puts forward more regressive proposals.

These proposals include barring certain individuals from using access, putting applications on hold either because the requests' wording was not acceptable or because of emergency situations, and limiting the information commissioner's order making powers, given she uses those orders too much.

Blaming a few access users and Information Commissioner Caroline Maynard for abusing their operations distracts from their keeping alive one of the slowest and most secretive ATI systems in the world.

In a Sept. 17 briefing note to Ali, officials pressed him to give the go-ahead to release its discussion paper online, but he did not sign on.

As reported in the [Investigative Journalism Foundation](#), Beeby asked Treasury Board officials about its review, the minister's position, and the discussion paper, but received no response.

Beeby did get reaction from Maynard who said that she would fight taking away any part of her order-making powers. Maynard said her orders are few, and are a necessary part of her review work.

One would have thought that Treasury Board officials had learned after many observers were taken back by their handling of the 2020 review where they took a long time and then issued no recommendations.

Civil society groups, journalists, and members of the public who took part in the earlier 2020 review had called for expansion of the law, the removal of loopholes, stricter timelines for responses, and more resources to make the system work.

I wrote to Ali on Dec. 17, 2025, asking him not to sign on to his officials' disastrous draft discussion paper that would make for a more dysfunctional access-to-information system.

I requested that the minister consider instead letting the House of Commons Access to Information, Privacy, and Ethics Committee hold hearings and give them funds to carry out a comprehensive independent review with no strings attached, and without delay. This way, he could avoid a costly and conflicted review headed by a division with more than 40 vested bureaucrats.

I have not received a reply from Ali.

Nor, as a matter of fact, has Treasury Board responded to my request on how they allow departments to take very long delays after three years. And it took Treasury Board four years to give me the department's suggested ways to further erode public access to their records that they had presented back in 2021.

Funny, though, that Treasury Board when assigned a task in July to cut red tape had some 500 recommendations out within 60 days in September. Yet, they do not wish to act on a slew of amendments drafted for decades, including on modifying exemptions and exclusions, some of which could cut the more than 500 ways of saying "no."

With Treasury Board once again handling the first stage of the ATI review, you can be sure of more delays, more proposed exemptions, more people being excluded from using access to information, and zero accountability on its activities and the millions of dollars they spend.

It would follow the trend by provinces like Alberta and Nova Scotia to enact more restrictions to public access that federal officials seem to like and want, too.

I suggested, however, that Ali only bring forward progressive legislative amendments for improved public disclosures. And to stay away from using the ATI review as cover for his officials' intent on keeping more data away from the public eye.

His officials keep saying all they want is "trust and transparency."

Too bad they have neither in mind.

Ken Rubin writes on transparency's lows and highs and is reachable via kenrubin.ca.