

Informed Voters Key to Democracy

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For democracies to work well, an important ethical component calls for voters to be well-informed so that they can vote wisely. This means those in charge of information – in many cases, politicians and government bureaucrats – ought to be honest and open, sharing relevant information to which they have access.

The ethical qualities of honesty and openness play a large part in helping voters choose wisely and in making democracy work well. However, knowledge-keepers are often tempted to share only the good news and to withhold bad news that may be detrimental to their aspirations.

No doubt there are some times and some situations where secrecy, or temporarily withholding confidential information, may be an ethically correct approach. Yet for the most part, democracy works best when knowledge-keepers are open and honest in what they reveal to the public.

On April 26, *The London Free Press* reported Ontario Liberals gave \$40 million to nursing groups to be spent retraining nurses in order to save hospital jobs, but as little as \$237,000 may have been spent saving jobs – the figures were revised after questions from *London Free Press* – while \$6 million was spent on expenses. The figures were reported in the fund's publicly available financial statements. Opposition parties are seeking further information through the office of the Ontario Auditor General.

In 1983, the federal Access to Information Act was heralded as progressive and a step toward improving democracy. Canadian provinces and territories enacted similar legislation as far back as 1977, including Ontario in 1987 and an Ontario act for its municipalities in 1990.

These acts were designed to govern the manner in which the leaders would be required to provide quick and inexpensive access to information. There are some important exceptions. For example, the Prime Minister's Office and the Privy Council are not subject to the federal act.

These and other exemptions for commissions looking into matters of health, food, and drug safety often have turned out to be problematic to journalists and other interested parties seeking information that in the first place was obtained by public funds.

The importance of freedom of information to the successful operation of an ethical democracy cannot be over-emphasized in upcoming Canadian elections.