

# What 25 years of writing on Access to Information looks like

by Ken Rubin *Hill Times*

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Sometimes, strong words are needed to express the lack of accountable government in Ottawa. Ken Rubin reflects on 25 years of doing that in the pages of *The Hill Times*.



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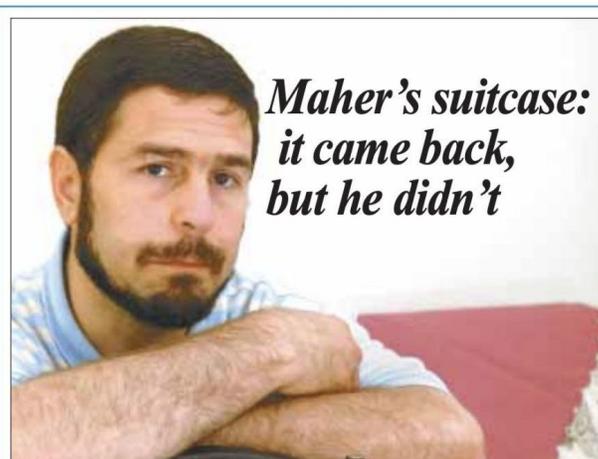
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### Harper's Conservatives real 'enemy' to Martin Liberals

Liberals working on  
talks with Bloc, NDP

By ANGELO PERSICHELLI  
TORONTO—It's increasingly obvious that Stephen Harper's Conservative Party will be the real "enemy" to Paul Martin's Liberals in this minority government. This is becoming clearly implied in the plans and the agenda prepared by Prime Minister Martin strategists. There is nothing wrong with that, just so long as it's the government's plan that will shape the agreements and not



*Maher's suitcase:  
it came back,  
but he didn't*

### Grits at odds over asymmetrical federalism

Expert Roger Gibbins  
says new health deal  
to weaken Ottawa,  
but for the best

By PACO FRANCOLI  
Prime Minister Paul Martin's new health deal, which created a panic in the Liberal Party because it allowed Quebec Premier Jean Charest to sign a separate deal with Ottawa, will likely further weaken the federal government's influence

A screen shot of an Oct. 4, 2004, edition of *The Hill Times*, in which Ken Rubin's article on Maher Arar was featured on the front page. *The Hill Times*

Time seems to have passed quickly in my 25 years as a columnist at *The Hill Times*.

At *The Hill Times*, I have been fortunate to have found a place to report fairly regularly on the state of transparency in Canada while always advocating for greater openness. As well, through multiple columns, I have been able to share insights into what's been happening to the access to information system from government to government.

The biggest story I covered over the years is an increase of instances of delay, deceit, and redactions on numerous fronts of government activity. That's been very detrimental.

A recent example of over-the-top secrecy is when National Defence sent me nearly 1,700 pages—almost totally blanked out—without even a single financial cost figure being provided on its controversial and ever-escalating multi-billion dollar naval combatant shipbuilding project.

One page had a heading about Irving Shipbuilding's annual profits as the prime contractor in this Canadian combatant shipbuilding project, but alas, no amounts. Another page about one of several Irving

shipbuilding contracts only left in a list 19 unidentified tasks and mentioned 47 contract amendments but no details.

There has been no end to the wealth of materials dug up by myself and others that the government prefers to keep secret. When approached about this, government public relations officials hardly said much and at times, their answers conflicted with what the documents received say.

Some of my favourite write-ups for this publication over the years have been:

- A [front page story](#) about how Maher Arar's suitcase ended up back in Canada while Arar ended up being rendered to a notorious Syrian jail.
- Articles about the government adding warnings to ministers' communications briefings about potentially embarrassing releases in [2008](#).
- A 2022 story observing Ottawa's second annual National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, including reporting on the poignant speeches made, the display of a long banner listing the names of thousands of children who disappeared, an unofficial march to rename Sir John A Macdonald Parkway that day, broken-down hand-washing stations, and the presence of a trucker convoy protester very near the VIP section.
- How I got to be sitting in the House of Commons Speaker's chair in 1996, basically through a photo-op at an after-hours international privacy conference held in the Commons chamber.
- From 2021 to 2023, calling out the Treasury Board in several columns predicting their 2020 open government review was a fraudulent, expensive, and deceitful exercise, warranting their exit from administering access to information.
- Also during the last two years, taking on issues like weak consumer privacy protection where I wrote about the dangers of secret artificial intelligence use and lopsided legislation proposals allowing corporate and government institutions to increase their surveillance of the public.
- Comparing 40 years of a weak Access to Information Act with a robust Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom Act, both enacted in 1982.

I hope that I have been able to pass on to readers the none-too-subtle art of denial of information practices that are in place. Many readers already know this coming from government and corporate backgrounds, but need reminding their actions are getting noticed and not forgotten.

I've been fortunate to have had editors to work with like Kate Malloy. I have seen, too, the evolution of *The Hill Times*, its diversification and its transition to a younger generation of publishers.

Sometimes, strong words are needed to express the lack of accountable government in Ottawa. I hope I have done that. Exposing Ottawa's wayward ways is always needed and will be in the future.

*Ken Rubin writes on transparency matters. He is reachable via [kenrubin.ca](http://kenrubin.ca).*