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Ottawa's new gag order on officials who deal in state secrets will deter those who oversee Canada's security operations from ever talking about matters the government wants kept secret.

By DARRYL DYCK / THE CANADIAN PRESS

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Zap! You're muzzled. Forever. Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government has just slapped a lifelong gag order on some of Ottawa's top officials and lawyers in the name of national security.

The people affected range from Harper's national security adviser and staff to officials in the Privy Council Office and justice department who deal with foreign and defence policy and

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Written by Joan Russow
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security and intelligence. They also include lawyers who work with Canada's super-secret Communications Security Establishment and the justice department. The gag order, quietly published in the Canada Gazette, covers *former* officials as well. In short, pretty much everyone in high places who has ever glimpsed a secret file.

[As the Star's Alex Boutilier reported Thursday](#) , they now face up to 14 years for disclosing "special operational information" without permission. That's a huge net that covers everything Canada is trying to keep secret including confidential sources, plans for military operations, covert intelligence collection, the identity of spies, coding and encryption, and any "information or intelligence" that relates to a foreign entity or terror group.

This is secrecy overkill. Under the Security of Information Act — the old Official Secrets Act — people who "harm Canadian interests" by handing over secrets *already* face life in prison. If that doesn't discourage traitors, nothing will.

While thousands of police, security officials and diplomats are bound by secrecy laws , [the new rules](#) will deter the policy-makers, analysts and lawyers who are closest to the PM and cabinet and are the architects of our security operations, from ever talking about matters Ottawa wants kept secret. This widening of the net drew criticism when the Liberals first mooted it in 2005, and again last year when the Tories proposed it, and for good reason.

Even a knowledgeable former federal official or lawyer who hasn't worked in government for many years will now run a risk by commenting on military operations in Afghanistan while the mission was ongoing. Or by expressing a view on whether the security services are abusing technology to spy on the public. Or, for that matter, on whether our computer defences are robust.

This can only chill intelligent debate over security and intelligence policy at a time when concerns are growing about excessive government secrecy and reach. The Conservatives defend the change as a way to provide "additional assurances" to our allies that any data they share will be protected, in the wake of Sub.-Lt. Jeffrey Delisle's damaging sale of secrets to Russia. But someone like Delisle, who got 20 years for spying, won't be deterred by the threat of 14 for disclosing "special operational information."

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This is about preventing people close to the PM from even thinking about criticizing the government. Given Ottawa's growing agenda of secrecy, that's cause for concern.