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Certificate issued on March 28, 2024 to English Account NG C3 for personal and temporary display.

news-20210930-TTA-20210930-62365638

Source name
Toronto Star (ON)

Source type
Press • Newspapers

Periodicity
Daily

Geographical coverage
Provincial

Origin
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Thursday, September 30, 2021

Toronto Star (ON)

• p. A10

• 1052 words



Parliament to focus on digital world this fall

Bills will target harmful online content, making companies pay for news

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Aside from COVID-19, the digital world will be a major focus of Parliament once it resumes this fall, with several significant pieces of legislation expected to be introduced - or reintroduced - by the government.

The Liberals have promised to table several major bills within the government's first 100 days, with the clock beginning to tick following the new cabinet's swearing-in, expected to be in October.

Among the bills is legislation to establish a regulatory system for social media platforms to combat harmful online content, and making digital giants pay news outlets for their work.

Added to this legislative agenda is the promised swift reintroduction of a bill to regulate services like Netflix and Amazon Prime, and require them to contribute to the production of Canadian content similar to traditional broadcasters.

On the nondigital side of things, the government has also promised to reintroduce legislation criminalizing the discredited practice of conversion therapy,

and a bill of criminal justice reforms to combat the overrepresentation of Black and Indigenous people in prisons.

The government is also expected to table a revamp of the Official Languages Act within 100 days, and push ahead with COVID-19-related measures including mandating that federal employees get vaccinated, requiring air and rail travellers to be vaccinated, and 10 paid sick days for federal workers.

Here's a closer look at some key pieces of legislation expected this fall and winter.

Harmful online content

The Liberals have promised to introduce legislation to regulate social media platforms to combat online hate.

"A number of MPs and other leaders that I've spoken to have said it would be in the top five pieces of legislation to come forward as soon as Parliament is recalled," said Bernie Farber, chair of the Canadian Anti-Hate Network. "We can't wait any longer. There is literally a hate epidemic going on in Canada right now... many of which have been inspired as a result of online activity."

Justin Trudeau's Liberals have promised to table several major bills within the government's first 100 days, with the clock beginning to tick following the new cabinet's swearing-in. Sean Kilpatrick THE CANADIAN PRESS

According to discussion and technical papers circulated by the government this summer, the legislation would establish a new regulatory framework for social media platforms, with a new commission to oversee the system.

It would impose requirements on platforms to monitor for harmful content, respond within specific time frames to flagged content, and be more transparent about their operations. The legislation would establish enforcement mechanisms, along with hefty fines for non-compliance.

Making digital giants pay news outlets

This bill would require digital platforms - namely Google and Facebook - to pay media organizations a portion of revenues made from the posting of work from news outlets. It would also allow outlets to negotiate with the platforms collectively.

The president and CEO of industry group News Media Canada said the bill must be passed through Parliament quickly, as media organizations - many of which were already in dire financial straits - have faced a further crunch due to decreasing advertising revenue caused by the pandemic.

"That's real money that can be invested in real journalists who develop real content," said Paul Deegan. "What we're looking for is negotiation and fair settlements."

Regulating streaming services

The government is promising to quickly reintroduce a bill updating the Broadcasting Act that would regulate streaming services. It previously attempted to do that with its polarizing Bill C-10, which passed the House of Commons at the end of this year's parliamentary session, but died in the Senate with the election call.

The bill would require the streaming sites to financially contribute to the production of Canadian content, and carry and make accessible a certain amount of it, similar to the rules that apply to traditional broadcasters.

Controversy erupted this spring over amendments to the bill, leading to accusations that an individual's social media uploads would also be regulated. The government insisted that was not the case, and moved to clarify that in the previous bill.

"The issue around user-generated content, which was the source of much of the public concern, I think that needs to be clearly excluded from the legis-

lation," said University of Ottawa law professor Michael Geist.

Conversion therapy

The government came close to criminalizing the practice of attempting to change the sexual orientation of LGBTQ individuals to heterosexual, or to coerce those questioning their gender identity to be in alignment with the sex assigned to them at birth.

The former Bill C-6 passed the House of Commons at the end of the last session in June but died in the Senate with the election call, following delays caused by Conservative MPs and accusations that the Liberals failed to prioritize the bill.

C-6 would have created several new Criminal Code offences, such as making it a crime to force a child to undergo conversion therapy or forcing adults into conversion therapy against their will. This will be the government's third attempt at criminalizing the practice.

The new legislation should make it clear that it's a crime to force all individuals, including adults, into conversion therapy, regardless of consent, said Kristopher Wells, Canada research chair for the public understanding of sexual and gender minority youth at MacEwan University in Edmonton.

"You can't consent to something that is patently fraudulent and harmful," he said.

Criminal justice reforms

The government will be bringing back legislation that would repeal mandatory minimum prison sentences for all drug offences and some firearm offences, allow for more conditional sentences such

as house arrest, and reform the way drug possession cases are handled.

The bill is part of the government's attempt to tackle the overrepresentation of Black and Indigenous people in prisons.

The Liberals previously attempted to deal with the problem in Bill C-22, which died in the previous session after having barely budged in the House.

"We would urge the government to go one step further toward decriminalizing simple drug possession offences," said Daniel Brown, vice-president of the Criminal Lawyers' Association.

The association and experts on the criminal justice system are pushing the government to repeal more mandatory minimum prison sentences, which prevent judges from tailoring sentences to the circumstances of individual offenders.