



Freedom of Information

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Freedom of Information—finally with us

Freedom of Information laws are finally in force in the United Kingdom. First promised by Labour in 1974, 'freedom of information' became a reality on 1st January 2005.

The UK has joined the mature democracies of the United States, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Ireland and 50 other countries in allowing its citizens the legal right to access information about the way that the country is governed.

The Freedom of Information Act ushers in a new era of openness. The UK's public authorities—Central Government Departments, regulatory bodies Local

Authorities, Health Authorities, Police Authorities, Fire Services, doctors and others—must now supply information to anyone requesting it (subject to 23 exemptions that public authorities can use to withhold information, including national security and confidentiality).

Although public authorities are required to respond to most requests within 20 working days, it remains to be seen whether reality conforms to theory—particularly as public bodies have not been given extra money to deal with information requests. There is significant evidence to show that many public

bodies are not ready for the new law.

Richard Thomas, the Information Commissioner and enforcer of freedom of information law, has indicated that he will be tough on public authorities that do not meet their obligations. "Whitehall departments, and more than 100,000 other public bodies that are affected by FOI, have had four years to prepare. I will not be able to be sympathetic to bodies that have not made good use of this time. Excuses such as lack of time or poor record management systems will not wash," said Mr Thomas.

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Government accused of mass document destruction

Thousands of Whitehall files were shredded just days before the Freedom of Information Act came into force. Records apparently show the number of official documents destroyed rose dramatically in the last few months. Some government departments have almost doubled the number of files and records destroyed.

Tony Blair had insisted on FOI laws being implemented in one 'big bang,' as opposed to a phased roll-out, as recommended by Jack Straw and Lord Irvine.

Julian Lewis, the shadow

Cabinet Office minister, warned that the frantic destruction of documents could deprive academics and historians of potentially vital information about the run-up to the Iraq war and previous conflicts such as the Falklands. Mr Lewis said, "there has been a dramatic and disturbing increase in the number of files that have been shredded.

"The steep rise in shredding in some departments is hard to account for other than the awareness that information in these files will no longer be classified as confidential. In the past,

the Government could say nothing until 30 years had elapsed.

In late December, Norman Baker, the Liberal Democrat environment spokesman, said, "I thought that the sight of every light burning in government departments late into the night was a sign of the Government's total disregard for the environment. Now I know civil servants are burning the midnight oil and shredding everything in sight before the deadline."

Michael Howard rounded on
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