

# Restore to Our Land the Liberty to Know

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**"Everything secret degenerates, even the administration of justice, nothing is safe that does not show it can bear discussion and publicity."**

—LORD ACTON.

**T**HERE is no department of government more secretive than the Treasury. There is nothing in our culture which degenerates faster than money. All attempts at monetary and tax reform are thwarted by secret agreements.

The country is moving further and further into debt and when the authorities go cap in hand to the money lender, conditions are imposed. The full ignominy of those conditions is hidden from view by secrecy. There is no hope of a sane and sensible monetary system whilst secrecy hides the enforcement of crippling conditions.

Why do we tolerate secrecy in government when it is known to incubate corruption? There is a popular belief that official secrecy is essential for the security of the nation.

This belief is fostered by those who believe that what the people do not know will not hurt them and what the people do know may hurt their rulers. The truth is somewhat different. Under cover of secrecy the enemies of the state have been given the very information which the populace regard as requiring the greatest need for secrecy. The military might of Russia has been financed and tutored by the West. This is made clear in Antony Sutton's three-

volume history *Western Technology and Soviet Development*. So to what purpose are we subjected to the indignity of the Official Secrets Acts, for indignity it must surely be? The loyalty and patriotism of the civil servant is mocked by the laws of secrecy.

It is interesting to examine the phenomenon of secrecy and consider its characteristics.

Secrecy has two major functions. The first purpose of secrecy is to provide protection from an enemy. It is preferable that an enemy should remain ignorant of a nation's means of defence, and if attack is the best means of defence, then the nation's plans for attack should not be known to an enemy.

The second objective of secrecy is to hide from view. If a man has committed a crime he will keep it secret if he does not wish to be brought to justice. There may be categories of secrecy which lie between these two extremes. For example there may be ticklish negotiations which may not succeed if interrupted by inspection and there is the need for privacy.

But broadly speaking secrecy required for protection from attack lies in the realm of military defence and crime detection, and secrecy required to hide from view lies in the realm of concealment of the discreditable.

Secrecy as a means of security can be justified, but the use of secrecy in order to hide, is not so

laudable. The critical factor which determines the value of secrecy is whether it protects the freedom of a nation or whether it reduces the freedom of its people.

Secrecy which aids security protects the freedom of a nation, but secrecy which is used to conceal, undermines the very basis of freedom. A democracy without a free and truthful flow of information from government to its people is nothing more than an elected dictatorship. Secrecy can so easily become an instrument for the furtherance of suppressive rule.

But apart from the threat of secrecy to the survival of democracy there are other more tangible dangers from inappropriate concealment. These dangers have been called by Ralph Nader "silent violence." He refers to pollution of the environment by radiation and chemicals which can damage health or kill without being detectable by the senses. These health hazards are made exceedingly dangerous through the injudicious use of secrecy.

The risk of rabies has been given enormous publicity, but the risk of contracting cancer from exposure to asbestos was kept hidden by official secrecy from around 1952 to April 1976. The Government had no intention of releasing this information and were shamed into publishing the data by Mrs. Tait and the *Daily Mirror*. Mrs. Tait was widowed by asbestos and it took her eight years of investigation to get the truth revealed.

The hazards of radiation are shrouded in secrecy. This is a crime against humanity for the risk involved in merely transporting radioactive waste through this crowded island is almost beyond the mind of men to comprehend. Life on this planet could not com-

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mence until plutonium had decayed out of existence. Its presence in the environment is incom-



patible with life.

It is possible that Man has now created hundreds of tons of plutonium which has been shrouded in secrecy. The continuing existence of life on this planet will henceforward into eternity depend upon a priesthood of highly trained and dedicated personnel who will for the next millennium take full responsibility for guarding this material. Such people have not existed in history; how should we imagine that they exist today or will continue to exist indefinitely?

Recently a group at Habitat in Toronto admitted that they were illegally in possession of sufficient plutonium to wipe out humanity.

If we value our lives, our liberty and this land of ours we shall not tolerate secrecy which conceals dangers that threaten our survival. We owe it to posterity to take responsibility for modern technology. Secrecy prevents anyone from being responsible. So what hope is there for the future?

In the House of Lords on November 25, 1975 Lord Harris of Greenwich, in his address in reply to Her Majesty's speech, stated "The Government are pressing ahead with the preparation of detailed proposals to meet our broad Manifesto commitment to replace the Official Secrets Act with a measure to put the burden on the public authorities to justify withholding information." That promise fulfilled would achieve a reform that is comparable in importance to Magna Carta itself. It would produce a total about-face of the existing political climate. It would restore the citizen's right to know and rejuvenate our parliamentary democracy. But before propounding the benefits of reform in the laws of secrecy, we must first consider whether we can afford the luxury of a right to know when threatened by the mili-

tary might of a foreign power.

Can we afford any relaxation of secrecy in these troublous times? There are many people who regard official secrecy as enormously important to our national security. It has been said that the price of liberty is eternal vigilance. If we fear the might of the Eastern block it is because we fear for our freedom. We are not so much in danger of extinction by nuclear conquest as we are in danger of the slavery of conquest by consent. The technique of the cold war which many people consider to exist at this time, is the use of subversion and insurgency. To guard against subversion vigilance is essential and excessive secrecy makes vigilance impossible. A grand scale take-over bid by a foreign power is utterly dependent for its success upon secrecy. Secrecy needs to be concentrated into the realm of defence and crime detection where it belongs. An all-embracing secrecy is counterproductive to security during a cold war. There is no doubt that security would be served best by discrimination in the use of secrecy.

For reasons which are crucial to our survival, we should no longer tolerate the iniquities of a secret government. Before it would be possible to implement any sane reform in monetary policy and taxation, the curtain of secrecy which hides the real obstacles to reform, must be taken away. The right to know what dictates fiscal policy must be restored. Secret agreements which lead to insane policy must be exposed. There is no other way we shall get free of them. Until we are freed from secret agreements that help to cripple our economy we can never recover.

In April 1975 Mr. Arthur Lewis

**WHY** is it that people thrust to the very depths of slavery can find in themselves the strength to rise and free themselves, first in spirit and then physically, while people flourishing without hindrance on the very summit of freedom suddenly lose all taste for it, grow fatally confused and begin almost to crave slavery.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn

MP set up an all-party committee at the House of Commons to provide a platform from which MPs, Lords, representatives of organisations and individuals could present their case for the introduction of a Freedom of Information Act as the ideal measure to be adopted by the Government to implement the Manifesto promise.

Now is our chance to achieve a reform that will open the door to the implementation of sound monetary policy, a rationalisation of our tax system and protection from silent violence.