

# Making the Public Sector More Public

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**S**ECRECY is an illness of Society.

Since the last war government in Britain has become more and more inefficient. The people have become increasingly unhappy at the way the country is run and they blame the politicians for bad conditions. The real trouble lies hidden behind a wall of secrecy. People are not told the truth because it is a secret and not in the 'national interest' to disclose what has gone wrong.

When secrecy hides the work that goes into a job, slovenly irresponsible workmanship passes undetected. Standards fall and anything goes. The work of our government is traditionally secret. There is a convention of 'wisdom' that there shall be secrecy. Secrecy has become a disease spread by bureaucracy.

We have talent in this country yet other European countries seem to do better than Britain. This is not because the Germans or the French or the Dutch are better than the British but because their governments are more open in their work. Public servants must give a high standard of work when their work can be seen and inspected. In Britain the work of the public servant is not seen. They are not publicly accountable for their mistakes, omissions, blunders or standards of efficiency. As a result the people of Britain suffer inadequate government.

I am an engineer and if I design a bridge I am responsible for the construction of that bridge. My whole career and reputation will be destroyed if the bridge fails to carry the loads for which it was created.

Such harsh discipline makes for efficiency in the work of every engineer. The civil servant with his right to anonymity given to him by secrecy has no permanent public discipline to maintain the standard of his work.

The deterioration in the efficiency of government in Britain is particularly disastrous because the country is committed to state

ownership of industry. The long record of inept management of publicly owned enterprise, which is born of secretive government, creates ready made ammunition for those of us who oppose the nationalisation of industry. State ownership of industry does not have a sporting chance of success whilst the Official Secrets Act provides camouflage for the incompetent. If we are condemned to National Enterprise, then surely we are entitled to expect public ownership to be public. Under the existing laws of secrecy, private enterprise is the subject of public scrutiny whilst a national enterprise can be so secretive that Public Enquiries and Royal Commissions have to be appointed by Parliament in an attempt to obtain the most elementary information.

On general principles we are all concerned regarding the success of management by government. Taxpayers pay the piper and should have some say in calling the tune. Secrecy in government deprives them of this elementary democratic right.

There is another aspect to secrecy which transcends all party political considerations. I refer to the most basic of all human rights, the right to know the truth. In Britain we only have a right to know what we are officially permitted to know. It is illegal in Britain to know unless the knowledge has been officially released. Such a state of affairs is incompatible with true democracy.

Advantage has been taken of secrecy to build up in this country massive data storage systems. Networks of computer controlled data banks now provide the State with the most intimate and personal information regarding each individual. From cradle to grave information from all sources is fed into the State machine to build up a comprehensive profile of every citizen.

A complex society of 55 million in a small island does require sophisticated and efficient data

banks in order to strive for the optimum conditions of existence for its members. But the creation of such a facility in secret and its secret use can put every member of that society into grave danger. The individual can be condemned without trial if the data held upon him by the State is inaccurate. Only the individual himself could possibly know whether the data held upon him was true or false.

It is vital that the establishment of State data stores about individual citizens should not be in secret. The individual must know what is being done. He must also have a right to inspect and correct all data held upon him. In order for the individual citizen to be able to do this, there must be no secrecy about data bases and the citizen must have the right to inspect and correct his own files.

Reform of the laws of secrecy must be a package which gives privacy with Freedom of Information. The privacy aspect of Freedom of Information is very specific and is not controversial. The concept has been accepted and welcomed by everyone in the Consumer Credit Act which enables an individual to inspect and correct data held upon him by a credit agency. Everyone has understood the need for such protection as a basic human right of the individual. Now is the time for government to put its own house in order and apply the same principle to itself as it demanded from credit agencies.

When the Official Secrets Act is replaced with a Freedom of Information Act, the rights of the individual in relationship to the use of State data bases will have been safeguarded. The need for a Data Protection Committee may vanish. At present, while secrecy remains, the Data Protection Committee provides no true safeguard to the individual citizen.

There are many different reasons for interested groups to seek reform of the Official Secrets Act. Those reasons may well be in conflict one with another. But the principle involved is restoring the right of the citizens of Britain to know the truth. That principle transcends all party political barriers and it also transcends all personalities and factions.