

Subject: Strongly oppose the abolition of the Australian Information Commissioner
Date: Saturday, 1 November 2014 8:31:06 PM

Hi,

I am writing to register my strong opposition to the abolition of the Australian Information Commissioner.

As a former public servant and active proponent for open government, I regularly engage with agencies and the public to discuss and train on FOI and Government 2.0 measures and believe that the Coalition government is taking a major step backwards that will harm the integrity of our governance system, the credibility of our government and negatively impact on our international standing.

It is in the best interests of Australians that the country maintain a strong and effective Freedom of Information regime, that does not discriminate against applicants by way of price or timing.

With the introduction of the FOI reforms in 2010, Australia finally had a Freedom of Information regime that was beginning to meet the needs of the community for the 21st century.

With a bias towards open, reflecting the stance of other western democracies, Australia was stepping towards an age of improved government transparency and accountability.

There was a increase in FOI requests as agencies adjusted to the notion of a bias towards publishing information, which other jurisdictions have found is simply a short-term trend, quickly replaced by a much lower cost scheme as agency management worked from a position of openness, whereby information collected and disseminated by government was done so in a manner which made it easier and cheaper to release proactively.

This reduced FOI costs overall and supported a robust open data approach (which Australia is struggling to maintain in light of the Prime Minister's rejection of membership of the Open Government Partnership).

The attempt by the new Coalition government to shut the doors of the Australian Information Commissioner reflects other attempts by the government to reduce the information available to the public on the inner workings and decision-making of government, such as in the Immigration, Infrastructure and Education portfolios.

This has not gone unnoticed within Australia or overseas and is damaging our international reputation on an ongoing basis. When I train public servants in Asia on open government, the attempts by the Australian government to close the doors to 21st century democracy are often a key topic raised by the senior bureaucrats I work with.

Many of them find it difficult to understand why Australia is, and I quote, "turning away from good governance", and moving towards "a far more secretive regime that can only mean increasing corruption, poorer decisions and lower accountability - the problems we are busy solving in our jurisdiction".

While I understand the government is looking for cost savings, realising them through greater secrecy and raising the barriers and timeframes for FOI requests is likely to

conceal bad decision-making and waste to a level hundreds of times greater than the meager savings from shutting down one of the most important mechanisms of government.

While I appreciate that the Coalition has already made this a 'done deal' by starving the Information Commissioner's office of funds and forcing most officers to be let go, this step towards less openness will result in further acceleration in the decline of trust in Australia's governance systems and in the political parties that sit atop of it.

Given that state governments in Australia and governments internationally are finding that improved transparency and accountability is critical for good governance, the assumption that many in the civic sphere are currently taking is that the Australian government is taking this step not for sound evidence-based reasons, but simply as a Coalition ploy to reduce scrutiny of their actions.

As they have already found in the Immigration sphere, this will only cause opponents of the government to redouble their efforts to expose wrong-doing and cause major disruptions to the ability of the current and future Australian governments to govern.

Best regards,

Craig Thomler

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