

# Freedom of Information

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Review

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**Editor:** Rick Snell

**R porters:** Jason Pizer (Vic.),  
Cathy Mitchell (Vic.)  
Brendan Reilly (Vic.)  
Jeremy Whelen (Vic.)  
Helen Townley (Tas.)  
Ron Fraser (Cth)  
Geoff Harness (Cth)

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Elizabeth Boulton

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## Comment

In this issue the UK Government White Paper on Freedom of Information is looked at in some detail. I would urge all those keenly interested in access to information to visit the web sites mentioned in the article to look at how quickly the home of Westminster is moving towards a form of open government. I hope that while you observe the UK developments you pause a few seconds and ask whatever happened to the Australian Law Reform and Administrative Review Council reforms? It seems that the only real development has been to move the Commonwealth Fol unit from the Administrative Law branch to the same area that deals with military and security intelligence issues.

The effort that was put in by the ALRC/ARC, by the Attorney-General's department and the organisations and individuals who made submissions seems destined for the waste heap of history. The greater the input and participation by citizens and non-government organisations in the law reform process the less likely it is that any substantive and quick changes will occur in practice and in the statute books. It would be refreshing for the Commonwealth Attorney-General to come out and just say 'This government has no real interest in making positive reforms to Fol practice or legislation in this country. We are content for the Irish, New Zealand and United Kingdom governments to steal a march on us.'

Meanwhile Freedom of Information still manages to create headlines at the State level. In Victoria, applicants discover how easy it is for an agency to deny that the information exists (see the coverage of the Victorian police files saga on the *Age* website <<http://www.theage.com.au/special/police/index.html>>). In Queensland the expenses and sex scandal claims three ministerial scalps as the Queensland Government's hiding of ministerial expense spending from Fol access, by using Cabinet, proves ineffective. In Tasmania, the Government rebounded from having its massive 1994 Amendment Bill blocked by inventing a new series of administrative arrangements to bring ministerial briefings and question time briefs within the protection of the Cabinet exemption provision. It did not seem to worry any Minister, their advisers or the Fol officers involved in these new arrangements, that the only purpose for this new and artificial system was to use the *Freedom of Information Act 1991* (Tas.) to deny access to information requests by journalists and opposition MPs.

Maybe we can produce new T-shirts for all State Government Ministers around Australia bearing the logo 'Fol be damned — Let the shredders rip'.

**Rick Snell**

tel 03 62 26 2062 fax 03 62 26 7623

email: [R.Snell@law.utas.edu.au](mailto:R.Snell@law.utas.edu.au)

Web site: <http://www.comlaw.utas.edu.au/law/foi>