



## IMPROVING ACCESS TO GOVERNMENT INFORMATION

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THE CLERK OF THE PARLIAMENT

Submission to the  
Legal, Constitutional and Administrative Review Committee

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This submission addresses the committee's third issue of interest conveyed in its discussion paper: *Is information relevant to, and about, government decisions and actions adequate and accessible? How can it be improved?*

The submission recommends improvements required for compliance with two FOI rights. To quote section 5a :

- *every person has a general right of access to documents held by government agencies, subject only to specific exemptions necessary to protect public and private interests;*
- *government agencies are required to publish information about their structure and functions, providing the public with knowledge about the organisation of government and its responsibilities and decision-making processes.*

Developments in web-based information technology and rapid uptake of this technology by Australians (73% of Queenslanders in 2004 have access to a home computer) have made it economically feasible and imperative to fulfil these rights. While the Queensland government is clearly committed to providing the public with online government information, there remain significant gaps.

Much of what is web-accessible to public servants as 'Insite' information is unavailable to the public. There seems little justification for this in democratic Australia. Cost cannot be used to argue against such provision for once the information is HTML formatted and made available on the Insite service, there would be insignificant or zero cost to make it available to the general public, who are paying for it already.

However, as indicated in this submission, there is much more to be done, requiring additional public investment. There are significant information walls – interdepartmental as well as between agencies and the public – that are counterproductive and difficult to justify from a public interest perspective. As indicated by the Queensland Government's 'Smart Directions Statement for ICT' (November 2004) the Government is clearly committed to improving public access to government information. However it is unclear whether the kinds of gaps identified in this submission will be attended to.

This submission recommends a range of ICT provisions to improve information transparency, mitigate the need for time-wasting and costly FOI access procedures, and as will be noted later, considerably expand government and civil society capabilities in ways that are likely to be regarded in future as essential for administrative justice.

Government websites do not currently provide, and should be required to provide:

- **Comprehensive, real-time mapping of the changing organizational structure** of the entire State Public Service system, including academia, research centers, public schools and all semi-government agencies. Such mapping provision should reveal:
  - all departments and branches - from ministerial and ministerial advisor level to the bottom levels,
  - the functions of each department and branch and their functional and accountability relationship,
  - the geographical location, building and floor of each branch or office,
  - work program, core business, ancillary business, and future directions
  - the role and function statement pertaining to every staff position throughout the hierarchy with hyperlinks to the above,
  - staff names (as exemplified on many university websites)– with hyperlinks to individual websites disclosing their:
    - functional position in the system
    - geographical, building and floor location
    - work contact information – phone and email
    - description of current public service function and work program
    - resume
    - past, present and intended future project involvements hyperlinked to project proforma statements.
    - completed research papers, policy discussion papers and reports – paid by the public purse – stating whether or not representative of official policy.
  
- **A comprehensive SEARCH facility** associated with, and necessitating the above, so as to enable any member of the public or public service to undertake both text-based and visual zoom in/out searches:
  - **Role/function search** – to discover throughout the entire public service what functions/services are being performed, have been performed, or are proposed for the future, by whom and where – through having information presented textually and as visual 2D and 3D maps which display functional and geographical location of roles/functions, the staff fulfilling them, and contact persons. It should, for example, be possible for anyone to call up maps of roles/servants involved in land-use planning – maps that are can be alternatively ordered into specific functional domains (eg, industrial planning, natural resource planning, urban planning, transport planning, etc.), or into departmental branches, or project domains.
  - **Project search** – to identify all past, current and proposed projects, actors involved, as well as project status and outcome reports, through having information presented as above.
  - **GIS search** – to identify all past, current and proposed projects, roles, services, and actors involved – within specific localities
  - **Staff search** – to enable the public to find ‘the right person’, access information regarding decisions or proposals of public concern to which they



are contributing or over which they have authority, and to be given means of contacting that person.

- **Government document search** – to enable the public to find and retrieve any completed policy discussion document, work program, project proforma or report prepared by public servants – anything done that is paid for by the public purse – whether or not representative of public policy. This would only exclude documents to be kept confidential for national security reasons or to safeguard the personal information of individuals.

## **Justifications**

In the interests of administrative justice as well as effectiveness and economy of public resource use, these provisions are needed to:

- Enable the public and government officers to gain a readily accessible overview of current and proposed services and projects – of what is happening or not happening, and who is doing what – so that service gaps, needs and opportunities can be visible to all citizens, not only the select few staff (possibly overworked) given direct responsibility for the service area. The staffing difficulties in Queensland's public hospital system, for example, might have been detected and prevented had information on staffing levels and competencies been publicly transparent.
- Enable government and community members working on similar projects or services to quickly identify each other, share information and develop collaborative relations. There is great need for improved, informal networking within the public service system and between public servants and community. Informal networking and coordination can often produce better 'whole of government' policy and action response to public issues, particularly where innovative ideas are called for and where government and non-government skills and resources need quick mobilisation;
- Enable local communities or NGO's to integrate and coordinate government branches, services and projects;
- Enable community members and new public service employees to simply and quickly orientate themselves in respect to who is responsible for doing what and where in the ceaselessly shifting, public service labyrinth. Finding this information as a new employee is currently a matter of getting to know well-connected colleagues. However, even long-serving public servants who are well connected cannot be expected to convey the complex, moving picture, let alone present it in coherent, mapped form. If this is the case for well-connected insiders, the access problem for citizens outside the labyrinth is so much greater;
- Enable comprehensive overview of public service operations both by civil society and public administration to detect and prevent unnecessary duplication of effort and associated public resource wastage. Proposals to expend public funds on policy development programs, for example, would be more assessable and justifiable if seen in light of all similar programs already undertaken or proposed elsewhere;
- Enable school and university students and researchers gain a comprehensive picture of government administration and the decision-making operation;

- Render public servants more accountable for the decisions they make on program priorities, services, staffing and project decisions,
- Generally facilitate ongoing administrative review of the entire public service, by the public and this committee.
- Mitigate need for expensive and time consuming FOI applications. If, for example, all development applications and government assessment considerations and decisions were made publicly accessible in real-time, much FOI claims would not need to be made.

Provision of the proposed information and search provisions should now be regarded as essential ingredients of any administratively just, governance system. In view of Internet capabilities, the denial of these provisions will be increasingly difficult to justify.

### **Potential Concerns**

The prospect of rendering the public service transparent as recommended here may raise concerns that public officers will be subjected to time wasting communication from unreasonable, mischievous, and ignorant citizens. The public service will always have to deal with difficult people and protocols will always be needed to manage their concerns effectively and respectfully.

Consider that information opacity itself generates a flow of distracting communication that a transparent system would reduce. Furthermore, nuisance inquiries may be passed up and down chains of responsibility wasting the time of numbers of staff, whereas an open system will allow citizens to gain hawk-eye overviews and target 'the right person' in the first place so as to allow inquiries to be handled more efficiently

Whether information open or closed systems generate greater volumes of distracting communication is possibly a moot issue that warrants experimental research.

### **Recommendation: a comprehensive, civic information system**

Finally, it is recommended that the Commission consider the necessity – in this inquiry or a follow-up inquiry – of creating a comprehensive, civic information system for Queenslanders connecting Federal, State and Queensland Local Government levels along the lines recommended above, that would include similarly formatted presentation of and search provisions for Quasi NGO's, NGOs and community group information.

Where public funding or support is given to any public, semi-public or private organisation, program and staff information should be included on the system – if for no other justification than the public's right to know what its money is contributing to.

All self-funded organisations and groups should be invited to come on board and have their services, projects and contributors publicly acknowledged, identifiable and connectable.

To ensure optimum functionality of the system, all contributors to it will need to comply with information updating and project reporting requirements.

To create a Comprehensive Civic Information System it is recommended that the Commission push for a follow up inquiry or even better, an expert Task Force to examine the technical and cost feasibilities and recommend an implementation plan.