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Information the Key to Informed Debate

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Mr MORRIS (Mornington) — The Economic Development and Infrastructure Committee recently reported to the Parliament on improving access to Victorian public sector information and data and today I comment on that report.

One of the more important building blocks in our democracy is the institution of debate. We engage in formal debate in this house, some more formal than others. Municipal councils generally engage in formal debate in reaching many of their decisions. There is ongoing debate everywhere in our society whether it is in Parliament or in the newspapers, on radio or TV, simply down at the pub or across the dining table. Debate is good.

A decent public debate almost always informs and improves the policy outcomes, but what is even better is informed debate — that is, debate where people have access to the facts, where they are not dealing with spin or selected facts calculated to determine a view one way or the other but where they are dealing with all the facts. That is when you get seriously good public policy outcomes and that is when you get the best possible outcomes. The question is, how do you get that information out? That is one of the reasons this report is so important.

There is always a tension between access to information — the need for public to have access to information whether it is for the purposes of a particular debate or simply to be better informed about government processes, perhaps to inform a vote itself — and the need to respect individual privacy. The report quotes, and I tend to agree, section 5 of the Information Privacy Act which is headed ‘Objects of the act’. It states the objects of the act are:

... to balance the public interest in the free flow of information with the public interest in protecting the privacy of personal information in the public sector ...

It has got to be about balance. The public sector holds a huge amount of private information, some of it particularly sensitive information, so we need to keep that in mind.

Another factor in this whole issue of government information is the current structure of government. It is probably not intended to be opaque but it is effectively that. Historically ministers have been responsible for administering not only whole acts but sometimes parts of acts. We now have a situation where ministers have a variety of

roles, a number of portfolios and the portfolios do not necessarily reflect the government departmental structure. It is hard enough for members in this house to follow that process, let alone someone outside.

The report proposes the development of an information management framework with the default position that all public sector information should be available unless there is essentially a good reason it should not and with those privacy considerations taken into account. It goes on to suggest a whole-of-government approach. The only problem is it then goes on to say the whole of government should be fairly narrowly defined but should effectively be restricted to government departments and exclude a whole lot of other bodies.

The suggestion is that other agencies — and it identifies the Parliament, the judiciary, statutory authorities, hospitals et cetera — should develop similar information management frameworks but they would not be the same. That approach may suit the bureaucratic needs — and I am not saying that in the pejorative way to all — but it does not suit the needs of the citizens of Victoria, and it does not suit the needs of the clients of the organisations.

If we are going to have a scheme that is going to work and is going to truly assist debate and assist the public policy process, then it needs to be public sector-wide, it needs to take a consistent approach and it needs to be the same system so that people can understand it whether they are dealing with Frankston Hospital or the Department of Premier and Cabinet.

This is an important report, it is an important subject, and hopefully something useful can come out of it.
