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Comment

In this issue Maeve McDonagh updates us on developments in the European Union. It is interesting to see the same issues about principles of access versus the width, extent and nature of exemptions play out across all jurisdictions. The experience in the United Kingdom, and now at the wider level in the European Union, exemplifies the difficulty in translating a simple and clear principle of access into applied policy and practice. The irony is how simple the process to transform tentative experiments in access back towards the norms of secrecy; whether by amendment, practice, deliberate changes in administrative compliance or by allowing the ravages of budget cutbacks to flow unhindered into areas dealing with providing access to information. The struggle for access can take decades but be lost in moments.

Shane Sody provides an update on developments in South Australia. In addition he mounts a very strong case for the incorporation of a 'public interest override' into the South Australian legislation. Shane's article follows on with several themes from the earlier article by Greg Terrill. He contends very strongly that the original conception of the South Australian legislation as striking an appropriate balance between access and the exemption of particular documents in the public interest has become in practice 'a handbook for exemption of particular documents which can be labelled appropriately to achieve this outcome'.

In Australia we still wait for the outcomes of the two State reviews into FoI, namely South Australia and Queensland and the public unveiling of the Northern Territory's version of access to information legislation. The Queensland and South Australian reviews should produce further additions to an already overflowing list of positive reforms to the legislation, policy and practice of FoI in Australia. The Bracks Labor Government in Victoria may be contemplating further reforms, while in Tasmania the Bacon Labor Government still has a very large commitment to open government to actually deliver upon.

On an international level the Canadian Minister of Justice has announced a review into the Canadian Federal FoI and Privacy legislation. There have also been suggestions of proposed revisions to the Ontario legislation.

Meanwhile the New Zealand Ombudsman has slipped onto the web at <www.ombudsmen.govt.nz>. Documents and information from the web site include the ten Practice Guidelines developed by the Ombudsmen, the Quarterly Review and the 1999 Annual Report. Disappointingly the Ombudsmen's Compendium of Case Notes is not available online and still must be purchased for NZ\$25. It is not a large amount of money but it is a pity that such a valuable resource for users, researchers and those wanting to learn from the New Zealand model is still so restricted.

Rick Snell