

Freedom of Information Bill

THE FREEDOM OF INFORMATION Bill which has been travelling through a maze of Federal committees looks as if it will emerge for debate in the August session of Federal Parliament. But before you raise any hopes, rumour has it that there will be few amendments made to the existing Bill.

The early days

It all began back in 1972 when the Labor Government fulfilled an election promise and began moves to establish Freedom of Information legislation in Australia. In January 1973 the Attorney-General announced that Cabinet had authorised him to prepare legislation along the lines of the US Freedom of Information Act.

An interdepartmental committee was established as a first step, and reported in September 1974. Many elements of the present Bill were contained in that report. While this report was being debated, the Royal Commission on Australian Government Administration also considered the issues involved and a draft Bill supported by Commissioner Munro was prepared. This Bill, usually known as the Minority Report Bill, went further than the current Bill in requiring agencies to respond to requests from the public.

Following the election of the Liberal-National Country Party Government in December 1975, the government appointed another interdepartmental committee to study the legislation. Their report, published in 1976, was attacked for its failure to come to grips with the basic issues and for unnecessarily restricting access.

The present Bill was introduced in Parliament on 9 June 1978 as a 'unique initiative'. Since the Bill was introduced, the Attorney-General's Department has prepared and issued a booklet of background notes, and the

Bill was referred to the Senate Standing Committee on Constitutional and Legal Affairs. That Committee's Report, published in 1979, recommends sweeping changes to the legislation.

No interdepartmental committee

Although many people have been under the impression that an interdepartmental committee was formed to comment on the Senate Report, we have been told by the Attorney-General's Department that no such committee exists.

It appears that several government departments were asked to comment on the Senate Report. Unofficial sources say that the comments so far received have been hostile to the Report. The main reason for the hostility, as far as we can ascertain, is the amount of finance necessary to implement the Report's recommendations.

A 'practical' document

The latest newsletter of the NSW Freedom of Information Council (no5, June 1980) says:

'... Anyone who has scanned the Senate Report will be aware that it represents an impressive synthesis and analysis of the views submitted to the Committee by individuals and by representatives of numerous societies and institutions. It is by no means a frivolous or superficial document, and might indeed be described as conservative, in the true sense of the word, inasmuch as it has carefully looked at the changes aimed at by the legislation and recommended amendments to the 1978 Bill that are well within the bounds of the practical and the achievable.

If you are concerned that the forward looking legislation that is the Freedom of Information Bill, amended in the light of the recommendations of the Senate Committee, seems to be in danger of miscarrying because the views of our elected representatives in

Parliament may be subordinated to those of that arm of government which is designed to administer the law rather than make it, please write to the Prime Minister, The Rt Hon J.M. Fraser, and say so. And send a copy of your letter to Senator Alan Missen (Australian Parliament offices, 400 Flinders Street, Melbourne, 3000).'

So, get those letters written – there's still time.

Children's Book of the Year Award



Lee Harding . . . winner of the Children's Book of the Year Award

THE BOOK *Displaced Person* by author Lee Harding, has won the Children's Book Council of Australia, Children's Book of the Year Award for 1980.

Other books by Lee Harding include: *The World of Shadows*, *Future Sanctuary*, *The Weeping Sky*, *The Gift of Time*, *The Fallen Spaceman* and *The Web of Time*.

His books for reluctant readers in the UK, which are being translated into several languages, are bringing him a growing reputation in this field.

Early Aust collection given to NLA



MR RUSSELL MADIGAN (left) deputy chairman of Conzinc Riotinto of Australia Ltd presented the W.S. Robinson collection of early Australian exploration and development to the chairman of the Council of the National Library of Australia, Mr Ken Myer, on 6 June 1980.

The collection of about 400 volumes is valued at \$80,000 and includes autographed copies of books by the explorers Major Mitchell and Captain Charles Sturt.