

The Mercury, November 2020

Tasmania's government agencies are among the worst in the country at revealing information about their goings-on, and poor at delivering information during time frames.

LATEST, MONDAY NOVEMBER 30:

TASMANIA does not deserve the label the “secret state” but the government will work to improve transparency, Premier Peter Gutwein says.

Mr Gutwein met with Tasmanian Ombudsman Richard Connock on Friday to discuss ways of improving the application of Right to Information laws.



Premier Peter Gutwein rejects Tasmania is Australia's most secret state.

Picture: RICHARD JUPE

In parliamentary budget estimates committee hearings on Monday, Greens leader Cassy O'Connor said secrecy was a “feature not a glitch” of the Tasmanian political system.

“Don't you agree there is a cultural problem here that needs addressing as a matter on urgency?”



Greens leader Cassy O'Connor.

Mr Gutwein disagreed.

“I reject that Tasmania is Australia’s most secret state, however there are always things we can improve.

“I would like to make it clear that this government has released more information to the public than ever before.”

He pledged to release the [long-delayed report](#) into the state’s electoral donation laws in the new year.

Mr Gutwein told the committee hearings there was a need for more consistent approach to the sharing of information.

“We tend to operate our agencies as silos and we need to have more of a whole of government approach,” he said.

And he says the government has provided \$240,000 to the parliament to revamp its website to make to information available to the public.



An Ombudsman annual report found Tasmania to be Australia's most secret state (Below)

INITIAL, WEDNESDAY NOVEMBER 18: TASMANIA is Australia's most secretive state, with the nation's worst performance at releasing information to the public, the Ombudsman's says in his annual report.

Government agencies commonly disregard the intent of Right to Information laws, often release nothing at all in response to requests, miss deadlines and fail to provide adequate reasons for their decisions.

Ombudsman Richard Connock said agencies "don't seem to give sufficient weight to the fact that the Act creates a legally-enforceable right to obtain information".

He said the test of whether the release of information is in the public interest is also "frequently misapplied".

"Tasmania's public authorities refused access to any information in 30 per cent of their 2018/19 decisions," he noted.

"This rate of refusal was nearly twice that of the next-highest jurisdiction (Queensland at 16 per cent) and 750 per cent that of Australian's most open jurisdictions (Victoria and the NT both at four per cent).

"Tasmania's percentage of refusals in full has been increasing each year since 2016-17 when it was 15 per cent."

Mr Connock also noted that Tasmanian government authorities were also poor at determining RTI request within the legally required time frames.

He said 27 per cent of requests failed to meet deadlines, the second-worst in the nation.

Greens leader Cassy O'Connor said the government should be ashamed of Tasmania being the secretive state.

“Under the Liberals, secrecy is rife – and encouraged in government agencies. It’s the culture now,” she said.

“We know Premier Gutwein hasn’t been the biggest fan of transparency and scrutiny, but we urge him to rethink.

“Government is there to serve the public good, and should be accountable to them, always.”

Mr Gutwein said it was nothing to do with him, but rather public servants in government departments.



Premier Peter Gutwein. Picture: RICHARD JUPE

“The decisions are made arms length of government under the RTI Act,” he said.

“We have designated RTI officers, who apply the law, that’s what they do.

“In terms of how we compare with any other jurisdictions, I think that’s a moot point — our RTI officers are applying the law.”

Mr Gutwein would not reflect on the failure of 30 per cent of requests to receive any information in response.

“I’m not certain what they’re asking for. RTI officers at arm’s length from government apply the law.”

TRANSPARENCY PLEDGE PROMPTS LAUGHTER

(latest from today)

PREMIER Peter Gutwein says he will meet with Ombudsman Richard Connock to find ways to improve government transparency.

The Ombudsman’s annual report revealed the state has the worst performance of any Australian state when it comes to responding to Right to Information Requests.

The report revealed that 30 per cent of RTI requests receive no information at all, by far the worst performance in the nation.

Labor leader Rebecca White said the result was a sign of the government’s addiction to secrecy.

“It is a damning reflection of the contempt that you hold for people’s right to know,” she said.

“Why are you so afraid of transparency? What are you trying to hide?”

Premier Peter Gutwein said the government had made a concerted effort to improve transparency — drawing heckles from opposition members.



Premier Peter Gutwein as he walks into question time in State Parliament.
Picture: Zak Simmonds

Speaker Sue Hickey instructed members to “giggle internally”.

“I took the time last night to read the report and to have a good look at it,” Mr Gutwein said.

“I have to admit, the report does bear further discussion and inspection and this morning I have called Richard Connock and asked for a meeting and asked for a discussion about his perspective and about what can be done to improve transparency.

“There is a lot of public disclosure that occurs.

“We need to understand it, we need to ensure we have a good understanding of what’s occurring.

“I’ll begin that discussion with Mr Connock in the coming days and I will look forward to it.”

Greens leader Cassy O’Connor said the government had a well-deserved reputation for secrecy.



Tasmanian Greens Cassy O'Connor and Rosalie Woodruff MP. Picture Chris Kidd

“You can’t deny these numbers. Apart from organising a last-minute meeting with the Ombudsman to provide some political cover, what are you going to do about it.

Independent MP Madeleine Ogilvie said transparency was fundamental to democracy.

“We want government for the people, of the people and open to the people,” she said.

She said the government had allocated money in the budget for information technology, which could be applied to “Open Government 2.0”.

“This an opportunity to take a new approach to refresh and reboot how we release information,” she said.

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