

A chilling climate on FOI

It's not vexatious, it's exercising our democratic rights

WHEN it comes to the business of government, too much information is barely enough. So we struggle to see how the Department of Climate Change could consider Tim Wilson of the Institute of Public Affairs a vexatious Freedom of Information applicant, since in our book there can never be anything vexatious about exercising the public's right to know. No ifs, no buts. Dealing with Mr Wilson's 750 requests is no doubt time consuming, but guess what? When bureaucrats complain about being held to account the rest of us start wondering what they have got to hide. Journalists and researchers would have every reason to drop a few hundred more FOI requests onto their desks.

Mr Wilson has, very reasonably, agreed not to lodge more requests while the bureaucrats tackle the backlog. We hope this does not give them an excuse to dawdle. The department estimates it takes 39 hours for an officer to process one request, which begs the question of whether our public servants need a dose of productivity training. And, anyway, the in-tray in Canberra could be cleared in a moment if the government adopted a transparent approach to its carbon tax and simply released the documents now under

wraps. It is the secrecy of governments, not the ill will of its citizens, that creates a need for FOI requests. Indeed, our system of FOI is what sets us apart from undemocratic regimes: it is a precious right that has been hard-won and it must be protected.

Then again, the Gillard government would seem to have a lot to protect if a recent FOI request is anything to go by. We reported on Monday that documents obtained by the IPA under FOI show the department itself warned Climate Change Minister Greg Combet that a draft report over-estimated a crucial figure, which he nonetheless later used several times to push the carbon tax. It is perhaps not surprising that staffers are battling to process Mr Wilson's other requests for the truth behind one of the most radical policies ever seen here.

Transparency is about putting as much information in the public domain as possible, not about limiting the flow. The WikiLeaks exercise shows that volume alone does not make a free and open society. But it demonstrated citizens can never have too much information about the operations of governments. To suggest otherwise abrogates the compact between the state and the people.