

COOK ISLANDS LEADING THE WAY IN TABLING FREEDOM OF INFORMATION BILL

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The Cook Islands makes history this week as the first Pacific island country to introduce official information or freedom of information legislation into parliament.

The official information bill was tabled in parliament yesterday by deputy prime minister Sir Terepai Maoate, who has been a strong advocate to get the legislation in place.

Once passed, the act will give the public greater access to government information. The act will be administered by the ombudsman's office.

Sir Terepai said there is a 12-month period before the act comes into force, which was requested by ombudsman Janet Maki.

She explained that after the act is passed, an awareness programme will be run over the following 12 months to give heads of ministries and government officials the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the requirements of OI legislation.

Ms Maki said she has held discussions with her New Zealand counterpart and has informed the NZ ombudsman's office that technical assistance will be needed to review the Cooks' situation and make recommendations on how best to implement the act.

According to Ms Maki, if the act is brought into force straight away there is the danger that ministries will not know their responsibilities under it or would take too long providing information, "and this would defeat the whole purpose of the act".

The 12 months will also allow departments to upgrade record keeping and get all their records in order. She says some government departments need to be more accountable with the information they keep.

Sir Terepai said government officials should not be uneasy about the act or uncomfortable with releasing official information to the public.

"If they have done the best job they can, why should they be afraid of the public knowing what they do? People working for government have to be aware that they have to do the right thing... all the time."

Sir Terepai said another positive result will be that the act will make public servants work better and harder.

It will also give people the right to ask for information, and this imposes a duty on governments to respond to the inquiries of its constituents by providing information on request.

It also requires governments to proactively disclose information to the public rather than conducting its activities in secret.....PNS (ENDS)

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