



PRESS RELEASE

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Gov't takes vital step to let the 'sunshine' in

A new era of openness and transparency in government was heralded in the Legislative Assembly this morning (Friday 4 November), when the Leader of Government Business, the Hon. D Kurt Tibbetts, laid before the House the Freedom of Information Bill, 2005. The bill was unveiled as a discussion draft in advance of a public consultation exercise.

Government will shortly announce its programme and timetable for the consultative process, which the Minister anticipates being completed in 90 days.

"Responses will be given the serious consideration they deserve," the Minister said. Following that, Government will move forward with agreed amendments and prepare the bill for its safe passage in the Legislative Assembly.

The bill's aim is to give effect to constitutional democracy, by ensuring government accountability and transparency, and fostering and facilitating public participation in national decision-making. It balances the public's right of access against obligations to preserve confidentiality of sensitive governmental, commercial or personal information.

"The modern trend has been to create a fair balance between the right of the government to govern without always being in the glare of the public and the right of the public to access certain information," said the Leader of Government Business. The bill achieves its objectives with regard to "greater justice to the individual by rewriting the rules on secrecy of government documents," Mr. Tibbetts said.

The Minister acknowledged that the operations of government are often shrouded in mystery. "A document may be classified as 'secret' or 'confidential' even if it does not contain anything that is really sensitive," he allowed, adding that sometimes this can work to the disadvantage of private citizens who may be mentioned in classified documents with little recourse to redress wrongs.

“In some cases the document may even contain false or misleading information,” the Minister continued, adding: “Regardless of what the case might be, the private citizen may require that information so that he can make a case before a public authority or in private dealings, and yet he or she does not have access to it or have a chance to correct the details contained in it.”

(GIS)