



# Britain's New Era of « State Secrecy » Undermines Democracy

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*David Cameron nobly declared in 2010 that: “It is our ambition to be one of the most transparent governments in the world” **and** “Greater transparency across government is at the heart of our shared commitment to enable the public to hold politicians and public bodies to account; to reduce the deficit and deliver better value for money in public spending; and to realise significant economic benefits by enabling businesses and non-profit organisations to build innovative applications and websites using public data” **and** - “...we will extend transparency to every area of public life.”*

*The Cabinet Office still has these pledges posted on its [website](#) today. It was clear in 2010 that Cameron's Government was going to dismantle state secrecy in favour of accountability.*

Cameron cleverly used transparency and visibility because public confidence in politicians and politics more widely had been so severely dented that just 15 percent of the population trusted anything they said or said they would do. This was an all-time low ever recorded and came on the back of the expenses scandal in 2009 that ended with the infamous “Rotten Parliament” label being firmly etched into the history books of British politics.

Cameron [vowed to open up the books](#) of central and local government spending, along with other commitments including a Public Transparency Board headed by leading experts. He also specifically included the strengthening of the Freedom Of Information Act, publishing government department datasets on the basis of public demand, with the Ministry of Justice to support the public's Right to Data.

In reality, Ministers talked in dark corners of how journalists prised open the expenses scandal in 2009 that embarrassed them so. Freedom of information enlightened the public on just how much secret data the government and their agencies were holding on British citizens, what police knew about child sexual exploitation, details of [tax avoiding party political donors](#) and Russian oligarchs that the Conservative party is so beholden for their survival.

Setting new standards is something the Conservatives are doing, just not as we were led to believe. As an example, the Freedom of Information Act 2000 is to be diluted by making it harder to get information, described by journalist as “[an attack on democracy](#)”. Once redrawn, the FoI Act will be more a [charter for cover-ups](#) of ministerial and departmental malfeasance.

There are more examples of state secrecy. Recently, the British Government signed a secret security pact with a Gulf state and is now attempting to illegally prevent details of the deal from being made public. As The guardian reported:

“The Home Office released no details of her (Theresa May) trip at the time or announced that the deal had been signed. The only public acknowledgement was a year later in a Foreign Office report which obliquely referenced an agreement to “modernise the Ministry of the Interior”.

Government or their officials should not be signing deals with foreign entities in secret.

The number of cases where the government now shields itself behind ‘[national security](#)’ is both absurd and becoming farcical and amounts to nothing more than suppression of relevant public information. The illegal activities of GCHQ, British spy satellites, interceptions of communications, the silencing of Ben Griffin – the SAS whistleblower, official secret trials, the treatment of Assange and Wikileaks, torture, extraordinary rendition and the hushing up of British detainees abroad is to name but a few.

The Guardian reported in 2013:

“that Britain’s Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) had [illegally withheld](#) 1.2 million (later revised to 600,000) historic documents from the public, in flagrant breach of the UK Public Records Act. The documents – which include the desk diary of Soviet spy Donald Maclean; case files from Nazi persecution compensation claims; and masses of material removed from Hong Kong – were being held at Hanslope Park, a secretive, high-security compound in Buckinghamshire that the FCO shares with intelligence agencies MI5 and MI6.”

In June last year [Vice](#) headlined “*UK Government Protecting Companies Accused of Selling Torture Weapons?*” Amazingly, the case brought against the two manufacturers was dropped for “lack of evidence” even though the two manufacturers concerned were publicly thrown out of the London arms fair for doing so. The senior press officer at the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and HMRC along with the CPS simply refused to answer any further questions on the matter. Case closed.

The use of [secret courts](#) is an alarming escalation of government power getting out of control. Secret courts are where trials take place not open to the public, nor generally reported in the news and generally no official record of the case or the judge’s verdict is made available. Often there is no legal allegation. The accused is usually not able to obtain the counsel of a lawyer or confront witnesses for the prosecution. You would think this is the stuff of cold war Russia and Nazi Germany, actually it’s the stuff of modern Britain today.

MP Richard Burdon (Leeds East- Labour) [said in a speech just two weeks ago](#) in parliament:

“What about being held to account? We have seen the Trade Union Bill and the gagging Act. There is the strangling of the finances of political opponents, in contravention of decades-old convention. The Human Rights Act is seen as nothing but an irritant. There is the NHS weekly bulletin, which was due to begin publication late last year, but which no longer includes figures on four-hour waits. There are the new rules revealing that hospitals had effectively been banned from declaring major incidents—all that from a Prime Minister, who said airily just before entering high office, let “sunshine” be “the best disinfectant”. However, there is some cleaning up to do, because, put simply, this is a Prime Minister and a Government who do not like being challenged. This is a Prime Minister and a Government who do not like scrutiny.”

There is nothing new about government propoganda in Britain. For instance, in 2013, the [Guardian](#) reported that:

“The new Official Secrets Act of 1989 removed some of the more ridiculous aspects of the old one – such as forbidding the revelation of anything that was done in Whitehall (paperclip purchases, for example) – but at the same time tightened it, by disallowing a “public interest” defence in the cases it still covered. Then they – specifically, the secretary of the D-notice committee – wined and dined journalists to appeal to their patriotism to keep stumm. Apparently even Private Eye was nobbled this way. Chapman Pincher (famous English journalist specialising in espionage writing) was also kept on side by feeding him privileged information – not always accurate. Even more subtle was the wheeze of allowing certain academics and others access to the secret archives and permission to publish from them, so long as they were “trustworthy”; that is, “writers would be selected for their willingness to portray things in a positive light.”

And of course, there is no more confirmation of government secrecy than the negotiations of Britain, the EU and US on TTIP.

It is here we see an out of control government handing enormous state powers not just to domestic but also foreign corporations and thus make capitalism more powerful than democracy. Lawmakers, charities, legal groups and protestors in their millions have challenged and taken legal action in a valiant but vain effort to gain access to some of the documents relating to the negotiations. Well-funded corporate lobby groups have access to the top table, no-one else does. People’s right to know is fundamental to democracy and we don’t have it because of Britain’s new era of state secrecy.

How David Cameron, indeed government itself harmonises manifesto pledges that ‘*the Government must set new standards for transparency*’ whilst agreeing to the biggest trade deal in the history of the human species in total secrecy is unfathomable.

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