

B.C. bill could open up your private information

Proposed changes would radically alter freedom-of-information law

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Your privacy is at risk as never before in B.C., and the immediate threat isn't coming from Facebook or Canada's spy agency - it's a bill before the B.C. legislature.

Without consulting you, our premier and a gaggle of technobureaucrats have decided to sacrifice B.C.'s privacy law and radically increase their power to collect, use and share your personal information.

The government has put the pedal to the metal in trying to get a vast shift of our privacy rights in place before anyone gets a chance to say boo about it.

Bill 3, which eliminates many of the privacy protections in the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, was introduced Oct. 4 and has already had second reading. It could be law by the end of the month if they keep pushing.

So what is the big scary Halloween shocker?

Hiding behind euphemisms like "citizen-centred services," the government is making a big grab not just to get, but to pass around and use our private personal information as it sees fit.

Some of the proposed amendments to the FOIPP Act would make it easier for government to collect our personal information and pass that information along to other persons, "partner" organizations and other governments (including U.S. Homeland Security). They would also allow the government to bring in (at some unspecified later time) regulations to govern new "data linkages" - while exempting the entire health-care sector from those regulations.

Officials talk about how citizens are demanding convenience in dealing with government, but the convenience they are really talking about is their own.

And they are definitely not talking to British Columbians about how, when, why and with whom the government will be sharing some of our most intimate information.

Successive information and privacy commissioners have called for public consultation on government data-sharing plans. In 2009, then-commissioner David Loukidelis' annual report said: "It is certainly important that government not move forward with any legislated changes in this area unless and until there has been a full public consultation in the form of a position paper published by the government, followed by meaningful, extensive stakeholder consultations."

A special legislative committee that recently reviewed the FOIPP Act unanimously agreed that consultation on data sharing is vital.

The government has decided against asking British Columbians what we think about its brave new world. Instead, it conducted a secret process and "province-wide focus groups and surveys to help government gain a better understanding of the public's expectations of government services," according to Open Government Minister Margaret MacDiarmid.

The supposed justification for gutting existing privacy protections is that government is now "horizontal" (managed through a variety of public and private-sector partnerships), so it needs to share information without restriction.

The other reason for the big rush is that the government has committed \$180 million to a contract with Deloitte to set up an "integrated case management" system which will allow government

agents to search and manipulate personal information. It will involve a massive amount of data collection on a forced basis across the entire social services sector. Both government and non-government service providers will be required to report the personal information they gather.

These massive centralized systems have a problematic history, including in this province.

Just last month, a system to centralize information on students called BCesis was found to be an \$89-million failure.

In the U.K., the Commons public accounts committee blasted these schemes in a report entitled "Government and IT - 'a recipe for rip-offs': time for a new approach."

It's time to put an end to this government push to seize more and more of our personal information and spend more and more of our money on IT "solutions" that really aren't solutions.

It is vital for the government to start paying attention to privacy rights, and consulting British Columbians on how best to protect them.

Premier Christy Clark said: "Our government is changing the style and approach of governing to provide citizens with opportunities to influence and improve policies that impact them and their quality of life."

Maybe she doesn't think the creation of a massive data system with hundreds of millions of our dollars is one of those "policies that impacts them and their quality of life."

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