

Campaign Problem

Democracy works when we're all actively involved. To join the conversation, people need information. The coalition government is taking small steps in the right direction on transparency - proactively releasing Cabinet papers, considering a review of the Official Information Act. Civic wants to support this momentum and turn small steps into giant leaps.

- What is the problem?

When government keeps secrets, people are free to assume the worst. They become cynical and uncooperative. They think they need to be protected from government rather than thinking they are protected by government. Trust is the foundation of civil society and that is what's at stake here.

Access to information ensures a basic standard of transparency essential to democracy and our ability as citizens to hold our government accountable for its decisions.

The Official Information Act entitles the public to copies of any government information in a timely manner, unless there are strong reasons to withhold. In practice, there are significant issues with making OIA requests: people find it difficult to request information, there can be significant delays, it is common for information that should be released to be withheld forcing a time-consuming appeals process, some entities charge for OIA requests when they should not do so.

On the other side there are significant issues for public servants responding to OIA requests: they face political pressure to withhold information, they face political pressure to not record sensitive information, public servants have been told to make the titles of their reports non-descript to discourage having them requested for release, information management systems can be sub-standard, and individuals are often poorly trained and under-resourced to respond to requests.

- Who are those affected?

Any member of the public who uses the OIA can be affected. The biggest users of the OIA are journalists, NGOs and activists, opposition MPs, researchers.

- Why is there a problem?

Many public servants don't understand their obligations; there are no consequences for breaching the OIA; Ministers apply pressure to withhold information, due to a vicious circle of click bait, gotcha media cynicism and political caginess; public

servants resent the time spent on OIA requests as taking them away from more important work.

- What are the main causes of the problems?

The uneven power dynamic between Ministers and public servants. Poor systems and insufficient resources to answer OIA requests promptly.

- What is the impact of the problem and future consequences?

Lack of transparency reduces trust in government, prevents people from holding the government accountable, and discourages participation in democracy.

- How can the problem be solved?

Give public servants more power to refuse political demands of Ministers. Do this by strengthening the legislation, as public servants feel strongly about upholding the law.

We have identified four main areas where the law could be strengthened:

1. Enforcement
2. Proactive release
3. Reduce grounds for withholding
4. Extend the Act to cover more entities and types of information

- What evidence can support your definition of the problem?

Law Commission Review, Ombudsman's review, NZ Council of Civil Liberties discussion document, numerous articles by journalists and political commentators, personal experience answering OIA requests, conversations with other public servants. We have also had conversations with OIA reform advocates Andrew Ecclestone, Max Rashbrooke, Sam Warburton, Bryce Edwards, Graeme Edgeler, Kevin Hackwell.

There are many more stakeholders in this space that we need to consult with before finalising our plans for the FOI campaign.

Campaign Goals

To amend the OIA, LGOIMA, Public Records Act, and Ombudsman's Act to strengthen the freedom of information regime in New Zealand - thereby giving public servants more power to push back against inappropriate political influence.

- A. Draft a Freedom of Information Omnibus Bill
 - a. Develop a list of potential legislative changes
 - b. Consult on those changes with relevant policy wonks and general public
 - c. Refine list of potential changes
 - d. Convene an advisory committee to meet and discuss
 - e. Get detailed written feedback from advisory committee
 - f. Decide on the list of legislative changes to include
 - g. Draft those into a Bill
- B. Have the government introduce the Bill for a first reading
 - a. Pressure Andrew Little and Chris Hipkins to introduce the Bill
 - i. Meet with Andrew Little's office to discuss barriers
 - ii. Phone banking key government figures - Andrew Little, Chris Hipkins
- C. Get the 62 yes votes needed for the Bill to go to select committee
 - a. Pressure party leaders to support the Bill
 - i. Meet with key representatives from each party
 - ii. Phone banking party leaders and key representatives
 - b. Pressure individual MPs to vote for the Bill
 - i. Meet all MPs one on one in their electorate
 - ii. Ask MPs to pledge to support the Bill
 - iii. Phone banking campaign on key swing votes

To accomplish these goals we will need to raise awareness of freedom of information as an important issue with the public and build a network of volunteers capable of effectively lobbying Parliament for change. Building the awareness and capability will occur alongside the process of developing specific policy solutions.

- [AWARENESS] We want to put FOI on the national agenda, engaging people with why it's so important, enraging them and how badly it's working right now, and inspiring them with a vision of how much better things could be
 - Video content for social media
 - Other content for social media
 - Content and interviews for MSM
 - House meetings and public meetings to discuss the issue
 - Building a network of people who care about FOI change

- [POLICY] We want to move the debate forward from “we should do something” to a concrete proposal of what changes we should make
 - Surveys, hui, consult with experts to develop detailed policy suggestions
 - Draft legislation to implement those suggestions
- [PARLIAMENT] We want to pressure the Labour-led government to bring this draft legislation to a first reading in Parliament
 - Train and support volunteers to contact MPs by email, phone, in-person
 - Petition
 - Co-ordinate a campaign contacting MPs
 - Co-ordinate a supporting MSM media campaign

Campaign Goals

Objectives and activities	Indicators of process	Indicators of impact
Draft a Freedom of Information Omnibus Bill	Agree content of Bill (with who?) Complete a draft Bill	Have key influencers endorse draft Bill
Pressure Andrew Little and Chris Hipkins to introduce the Bill	Number of phone calls made Number of media stories Number of petition signatures	Govt announces date it will introduce the Bill
Get 62 Yes votes for the Bill	Number of MPs met with	Number of MPs publicly pledging to support the Bill

Use of funds

Basic admin costs have already been funded through several generous donations.

Funding from the Give a Little campaign will be split equally between paying Ben Zolno to generate social media content and paying Debbie Watkins to co-ordinate our digital campaigning and building a network of trained volunteers. They have both agreed to work for mates rates on the FOI campaign.

Board agrees to pay Ben Zolno \$30 an hour.

Board agrees to pay Debbie Watkins \$30 an hour.

Board agrees funds will be split evenly between Debbie and Ben.