

## *From the Kitchen*

2 November 2011



One area where citizens' freedoms are curtailed is in government-private-business contracts. There is a growing trend for governments to restrict public information about the details of arrangements it makes with businesses in the name of commercial confidentiality. It is understandable that businesses may not want the details of their methods and internal economics to be made available to competitors. But is there any reason for those who are paying for a freeway (the citizens) to not be given details of the financial arrangements between a government and the company building a multi-billion-dollar road? Should we not know what penalties are to apply for late completion, or what arrangements are in place should a bridge start cracking after, say, twenty years?

We are also often kept in the dark about the economic calculations made to justify having something built or managed by private enterprise instead of a government department, again because of commercial confidentiality – releasing the economic details would reveal something of the internal economics of the company given the contract. Government contracts are lucrative, or businesses would not bother with them. While commercial confidentiality may be defensible for arrangements between private businesses, there are good reasons for having government-to-business arrangements being open and transparent. After all, don't we own the services and infrastructure? Perhaps we don't.

Increasingly, the roads we drive on and the buildings in which federal, state and local governments carry on their activities, are owned and maintained by private businesses. Increasingly, the services provided by government at all levels are done so by private enterprise under contract. The details and quality of these services are set out in contracts to which citizens have no access.

An example of the impact of this on individuals' lives may be useful. Where I live, the maintenance of parks and reserves used to be a local council function carried out by local council employees. If a tree fell down and needed removing, a call to the council offices would result in a team coming fairly soon to deal with it. Similarly, if there was a growing collection of fallen branches and other flammable material which caused a potential fire danger to houses in the summer, someone would come soon to remove it. Now these services are contracted out and, while the general maintenance of the parks and reserves is fairly good, when it comes to detail it is difficult to have something done. When the contractors come to cut grass and the overabundance of flammable material is pointed out to them, they say that another team will come to remove it. No-one comes. A complaint to the relevant council office elicits the response that the council cannot give any directions to the contractors about specific tasks; if certain tasks are not carried out properly and there is enough complaint from residents, this can only be dealt with at the time the contract with the company comes up for tender, which can be years away. Do we still own the local council and its services, or are the services now owned by private companies?

In Australia we are moving away from analogue to digital television. This is a decision of the federal government. The reasons for this have never been made clear to the public – the

consumers of television broadcasts. The information on which this government decision is based has not been properly aired, yet people are expected to accept that the government knows best in this case. To what extent is this decision driven by sectors of industry? We don't know. In letters to the newspapers and calls to radio stations, people indicate their puzzlement about this and often their opposition to this move. Where is the information available which would allow people to accept the government's decision or to argue against it?

Using the argument that we need to reduce the amount of electricity we use in order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the government has decreed that we must change from using incandescent light globes to fluorescent ones. The fluorescent globes use about one-fifth the electricity used by incandescent globes for the same brightness, so it makes sense if there are no other factors. There has been and continues to be a concerted advertising campaign to get people to change. What has been missing in this advertising is the fact that the fluorescent globes contain mercury and cannot be disposed of along with household rubbish – they need to be returned to the retailer for collection and proper disposal. Most retailers are not aware of this and refuse to take back fluorescent globes that have ceased to work. Where is the information? The only place I have seen it is in small print on the packaging of some of the globes and occasional mention in articles in newspapers, extolling the virtues of the new globes. There has been no public debate about this very important change and no opportunity for people to examine all the information relevant to it.

Information is often described as the basis of modern societies. If this is so, then access to information is essential for those societies to function properly. If information is the basis for a society, then those who control that information can control the society. Who owns information that you need, to make choices and decisions in your life? How can you regain access to this information? Do you trust others to control the flow of information?

So, who controls your life and who owns you?