

Government 2.0 is Big Brother-approved

Plan 'less about what government is doing with its own data than what it's doing with citizens' data,' B.C. Civil Liberties Association says

BY DAPHNE BRAMHAM
VANCOUVER SUN
APRIL 14, 2011

A government that's more transparent and open. Sounds great, especially now in the midst of a federal election campaign caused by the Conservatives having been found to be in contempt of Parliament by failing to be transparent and described in a leaked auditor-general's report this week as failing to act "transparently" in spending \$50 million for last summer's G8 meeting.

So, on the face of it, we should applaud the B.C. government's plan to use technology to make it all better.

With the unwieldy title of "Citizens B.C. Government 2.0 - A transformation and technology strategy for the B.C. Public Service," it starts out okay.

Defining principles have phrases like "empower citizens," "save citizens' time," and "encourage collaboration."

Rather quickly, however, it becomes apparent that "transforming" government will mean a lot more citizen DIY and a lot fewer civil servants.

Still, that might be okay. Everybody knows replacing retiring baby boomers might be difficult and technology might be part of the solution. Besides, the plan notes that most of us bank online, book our own flights and hotels. And while it's infuriating when you can't get a real person on the phone when you have a problem, don't worry, the document says.

Accessibility, convenience, open networks, sharing data and "exciting

opportunities for citizens to directly engage with their government." That's what it promises, possibly using a single card that consolidates your driver's licence with your health card.

But on the second page of the document's introduction, there's the first of many red flags about this techno-utopia.

Existing policies and legislation that protect personal privacy are described as "barriers" to data sharing that need to be "resolved" to "enable better delivery of service."

The heart of Government 2.0 is "a lot less about what government is doing with its own data than what it's doing with citizens' data," says Micheal Vonn of the B.C. Civil Liberties Association. At its core, the plan is to link citizen information held by different ministries, gathered under different programs and culled from private-sector contractors.

In the old days, she says, these would have been called citizen dossiers and used for surveillance.

Further, she says, the government is for "flat out expropriating our personal information from the private sector and 'transforming' it into government information."

Seem far-fetched? Consider her examples.

In addition to the electronic health system that already links doctors, pharmacies and emergency rooms with your medical records, Vonn says the government wants private laboratories to submit individuals' test results.

Current private-sector legislation makes it illegal to use the information for anything other than the purpose for which it was collected without patients' consent.

But if the government gets the information, it alone will decide who can see it.

If you think that's okay, Vonn notes that in Britain, hospital catering staff have full access to patient records to ensure patients get the right meals.

Closer to home, she cites the case of veterans' rights advocate Sean Bruyere.

Officials in Canada's Veterans Affairs Department accessed his electronic medical records more than 600 times and used the information in ministerial briefing notes to help discredit his criticisms.

As Vonn points out, the B.C. government has already written new contract language for non-profit organizations that provide such things as addictions services, counselling, advocacy advice and safe housing for women escaping abusive partners, requiring them to throw their records into the data pool.

It puts clients in a terrible position, says Vonn. No guarantee of confidentiality or no care.

As for the community-based organizations, she says, they're effectively being blackmailed. Either they give up client confidentiality or funding.

For women and children in transition homes escaping domestic violence, this could be fatal.

As Vonn says, "No responsible government would allow this type of widespread dissemination of data for those in the witness protection program. Yet this is the system that will be mandated for women and children fleeing violence."

It's not clear exactly where the plan stands at the moment.

It was handed over to a committee of deputy ministers after its author Allan Seckel was replaced as deputy minister to the premier after Christy Clark replaced Gordon Campbell.

But it's unlikely to go away or be improved unless citizens remind the government that as much as they yearn for openness, transparency and efficiency in government, it need not come at the expense of the fundamental privacy rights.

<http://www.vancouversun.com/news/Government+Brother+approved/4613532/story.html>

© Copyright (c) The Vancouver Sun