

Summary of evidence presented to the 30-Year Rule Review Committee, 5 February 2008 at Church House, Westminster

Committee members present:

Paul Dacre (chair)
Professor David Cannadine
Sir Joseph Pilling

Evidence from David Blunkett

The Chair asked Mr Blunkett to comment on the review of the 30-year rule in light of the Freedom of Information Act. Mr Blunkett said the rule was not only devised in an era before FoI but also when there was a different cultural environment, when there was a “reluctance to actually acknowledge that people would want to examine what kind of supporting advice and information had been given, how decisions were made.” He said there was now a greater awareness – “partly because of the openness and transparency that rightly also exists; also because there had been a change culturally in terms of what politicians and former civil servants do themselves”. This dated back to the publication of the Crossman diaries.

He was in favour of reducing the time limit to 15 years; “to actually draw on recent history in order to learn those lessons to be aware of the truth behind what remains in the public mind as being seminal events, then you will want to be able to get to that information.” He said that it would have been useful to see advice [more than 15 years old] that had been given to previous administrations – there would have been valuable lessons to be learnt about industrial relations in the period 1979 to 1983. He also believed such access would aid cross-government working. “One of the things that I think is lacking in our system is a grasp of how people have struggled in the past to break down inter-departmental cross-government boundaries, and a failure not to re-invent the wheel.”

He said that the Freedom of Information Act had transformed the climate “with material that is now in the public arena and is openly discussed that would not have seen the light of day 40 years ago”. He also highlighted the significance of the Internet, which has meant that “people are able to delve into and talk to people about their experiences but not to get to the actual papers and the written truth...and it is better to have the full story”.

The Chair asked whether greater openness had helped allay a breakdown of trust between the public and the government. Mr Blunkett said: “I think it is a ‘Catch 22’. I think that the greater the transparency and openness, which is right and we have to retain, has temporarily (I think it is temporarily because I am an optimist) has actually contributed to undermining trust.” In time people would get used to transparency and not react as they do at the moment.

Sir Joseph Pilling asked if he thought there would be resource implications if the 30-year rule were reduced, with more and more material being transferred

to The National Archives. Mr Blunkett said that he thought there would be implications but the increasing use of electronic/digital record keeping would make a big difference. Sir Joseph pointed out that a very high percentage of material was destroyed. Mr Blunkett said that was “tragic.”

Professor Cannadine asked if halving the 30-year rule might put people off from entering into public life and could prevent civil servants from providing “candid” advice. Mr Blunkett said that 15 years was a reasonable time for “us to be able to reflect on what someone had done.” In the political arena things tended to be more immediate, “so that if there is going to be damage to you it is damage that hits you now.” He said that he had a fair amount of public exposure and that “I would rather have a debate about the decisions I took than I would about other things. I have made mistakes but I would like people to see that they were genuine mistakes and that the evidence was weighed and the policy was a rational one within the terms of what I was doing at the time.” He thought that a change might be more problematic for civil servants but they should have confidence that those accessing the information would be thoughtful; “it would not be so sensational as to damage the career prospects or standing of that individual”. Mr Blunkett thought that cutting the 30-year rule would enhance governance so that people could see the difficulties and learn from the past.

The Chair said that some civil servants had voiced concerns that a relaxation of the rule could lead to more “clique or cabal” government. Mr Blunkett said these concerns were psychological. “They are already worried about immediate revelations under freedom of information and therefore what is put on email or what is put in writing. It doesn’t appear to have stopped people doing it. They worry about it but they still do it. The revelations of what people emailed to each other included in the Hutton inquiry was staggering.”

Professor Cannadine asked if there was much support in the “political classes” for change. Mr Blunkett said the people he had spoken to were indifferent.

The Chair thanked Mr Blunkett and the session ended.