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Jer P.,

Thank you for your letter about the examination of the Thirty Year Rule.

I thought it sensible briefly to set out my views. If I can be of any further help, please let me know.

Many "official secrets" are no more than politicians' wish to suppress inconvenient truths. That being said, clearly there is a need for the passage of some time between the preparation and circulation of many (though not all) official government papers and their availability to the press and public. Three reasons require it. One of them is often overlooked.

1. National security
2. Commercial confidentiality
3. The encouragement of proper discussion within the government.

The importance of a period of confidentiality to good government – rarely considered when 'secrecy' is being examined – has two aspects.

a) If all official government decisions – and the arguments which preceded them – are quickly made public, the official discussions will become a charade. The real decisions will be taken by small groups of ministers and simply rubber-stamped in the committee system. Too much transparency encourages 'sofa government'.

b) Ministers will, in some cases, be reluctant to take difficult decisions if their advocacy of unpopular choices become public during their political lifetime. The problem arises most damagingly when the decision has a personal element. Discretion prompts me to take an historical example. The discussion about whether Samuel Hoare should resign – after defying official policy and signing the Hoare-Laval Pact – was prejudiced by his friends fearing that he would discover their "disloyalty".

Of course ministers should be expected to behave better than a) and b) above assumes to be the case. But reality suggests otherwise. And 'leaks' now make confidentiality more difficult to maintain. But unregulated official disclosures would in some cases, cause problems.

The shortcomings of the Thirty Year Rule are a) its "blanket" application - the assumption that it covers everything and the ability of officials/ministers to extend it beyond the normal period. Objective outsiders should make decisions on what should be retained and for how long the period should be. They would be the "great and the good" - which excludes politicians and journalists.

*Sent via
Yours sincerely
Roy Hattersley*

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