

British Government's Veto on Release of Iraq Cabinet Minutes Undermines the Rule of Law

Madrid, 25 February 2009 — The British government's decision to veto release of the Iraq cabinet minutes undermines the role of the judiciary to ensure that public authorities uphold the law, according to international human rights organisation Access Info Europe.

The argument by Justice Minister Jack Straw that to release the cabinet minutes would threaten "the public interest in maintaining the integrity of our system of government" is misleading and dangerous according to Access Info. On the contrary, integrity of government depends on open and accountable decision-making.

"The existence and use of this veto power is unacceptable in a democratic rule of law system. In no circumstances should the executive be able to overrule judicial decisions on a whim to withhold documents that might cause political embarrassment or reveal wrongdoing," stated Helen Darbishire, Executive Director of Madrid-based Access Info.

The existence and application of the veto violates the fundamental principles of the right of access to information, one function of which is to enable the public to hold the government accountable.

The UK is expected to ratify the world's first binding treaty on access to information – the Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents – which opens for signature in June 2009. In Access Info's analysis the very existence of the veto power will be a serious obstacle for the UK's ratification of the Convention: in a democratic system the courts have the final say on compliance with the laws adopted by parliament.

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