

DEMANDS FOR TRANSPARENCY - CORRECTED 2

Divers

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Demands for transparency are central to the current culture of public debate. Climate scientists and their associations, the former English football captain, individual politicians and political parties, arts organisations, BBC broadcasters, financial institutions, and local government have all been criticised in the past few days for not being transparent enough. The right of the public to question the decisions of those with power and demand disclosure of information from those in authority is essential for democracy, but transparency has become a double-edged sword, smudging all kinds of cultural distinction between the powerful and ordinary person. This has led to demands for transparency of that entity we used to call the private citizen. These demands can only control the behaviour of the citizen in general and stifle the creativity that relies on cultural exchanges between people. That transparency would threaten the privacy of the individual at first seems obvious, because wanting to know something requires the disclosure of something that someone else may prefer to remain hidden. We have always had to balance the public interest with that of the privacy of the individual, depending upon the issue. But when those in authority take up the cry for more transparency, rather than those who seek to bring authority to account, the result is less likely to be the democratic investigation of powerful interests and more likely the undemocratic control of the individual. Transparency is less of a threat to privacy in the sense that more information about an individual may be gathered or demanded. It is a greater threat to privacy in the sense that the actions we take and the autonomous decisions we all make in whatever capacity become subject to a panoptical scrutiny with the retrospective ability to censure or punish. This has the potential to restrict action and narrow the basis upon which we act.