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Australia still to deliver on ‘open government’ rhetoric

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Open to all? Lukas Coch/AAP

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After delays that threatened to see it dubbed an “inactive” member of the Open Government Partnership, Australia last week issued its **Open Government National Action Plan**.

The Plan offers benefits in advancing “transparency, accountability, public participation and technological innovation in Australia over the next two years”. It also sees Australia follow its peers with a commitment to increase “confidence in the electoral system and political parties”, combat corporate crime, “digitally transform the the delivery of government services” and foster “open contracting”.

The government promises to do more, much more, in the next iteration of the plan, due in 2018.

But the “ambitious package of 15 commitments” is just as much about bureaucratic turf wars – legitimising the ambitions of the Department of Finance and Digital Transformation Agency after the abortive **Gov 2.0** program – as it is about responsiveness on the part of politicians, officials and the increasingly pervasive private sector solution providers such as **IBM**.

Many of what the plan claims as achievements and building blocks for future development were contrary to to a commitment to transparency. The **Hawke Report** for example called for the winding

back of access rights under the Freedom of Information Act, in essence because they were administratively inconvenient. That view hasn't been helped recently, after Public Service Commissioner John Lloyd called freedom of information laws "very pernicious".

The Action Plan also cites the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner. The continued existence of this timid watchdog is attributable only to the inability of the Attorney-General to abolish the agency, despite recurrent commitments to do so.

The Plan also references Trove, an unrivalled digital initiative accessible across Australia. It was threatened in yet another round of National Library funding cuts. Boasts in the Plan about the National Archives are also diminished by the funding cuts it has experienced on a year by year basis. Open government means keeping the doors open and the lights on at curatorial institutions like these.

What's needed is more than buzzwords about "digital transformation", "technological innovation", "discoverability" and the release of "high-value datasets". Meaningful open government involves respect for figures such as Australian Human Rights Commissioner Gillian Triggs, who dared to ask inconvenient questions about government policies and their implementation in refugee facilities onshore and offshore.

Meaningful open government also involves a vigorous fourth estate, given that media organisations – unlike most individuals – have the skills and resources to use open government tools such as FOI to identify and critique wrongdoing. It is significant, for example, that the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Fairfax effectively exposed systematic wrongdoing in the finance sector, wrongdoing ignored by regulators such as APRA and ASIC. It is also significant that the ABC, amid ongoing financial stringency, continues to face threats to its independence.

The Action Plan is an achievement, but we should not take it at face value. There are no signs that the people charged with putting it into effect have experienced a true conversion on the digital road to Damascus. The "new ongoing multi-stakeholder forum" is commendable but needs to be substantiated by action that goes beyond privatising "high-value datasets" such as health records. Less rhetoric, please, about transparency and more respect by mandarins such as Public Service Commissioner Lloyd for the spirit of the FOI Act.

If we are indeed open to "open government" a fine demonstration would be facilitating AHRC access to what is happening on Australia's behalf in offshore detention centres.

