

Shredded: Hundreds of thousands of government documents

Hundreds of thousands of government documents are destroyed in the great Freedom of Information Act scandal

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Hundreds of thousands of secret Whitehall files are being shredded before the public gains the right to see them under the Freedom of Information Act on 1 January.

Figures obtained by The Independent show a dramatic escalation in the destruction of confidential papers before the new rights of access come into force. Whitehall departments, including the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), have almost doubled the number of files they have destroyed since the Freedom of Information Act became law.

Although the legislation was passed in 2000, Whitehall was given more than four years to prepare for its introduction. Ministers are bracing themselves for a flood of demands to see confidential documents. Freedom of Information will give the public unprecedented access to previously secret files, including details of ministers' diaries and confidential briefing papers.

But MPs accused the Government last night of racing to shred compromising information in a desperate attempt to hide it from the public.

Julian Lewis, the shadow Cabinet Office minister, warned that the frantic activity could deprive academics and historians of potentially vital information about the run-up to the Iraq war and previous conflicts such as the Falklands. Mr Lewis said: "There has been a dramatic and disturbing increase in the number of files that have been shredded. The steep rise in shredding in some departments is hard to account for other than the awareness that information in these files will no longer be classified as confidential. In the past, the Government could say nothing until 30 years had elapsed.

"It looks like there has been a bonfire of historical records."

Norman Baker, the Liberal Democrat environment spokesman, said: "I thought that the sight of every light burning in government departments late into the night was a sign of the Government's total disregard for the environment. Now I know civil servants are burning the midnight oil and shredding everything in sight before the deadline."

Campaigners warned ministers that they should not use exemptions to avoid answering the public's requests for information. Under the legislation, public bodies will be able to turn down applications if the cost of answering the query would be more than £600 or be against the public interest.

The Information Commissioner, Richard Thomas, who will arbitrate over disputes, has hired extra staff to deal with the expected influx of complaints about failures to comply with requests. Details about the nuclear industry, trade deals and investigations into wrongdoing by companies may now never see the light of day because of shredding by the DTI. The department has almost doubled the number of files it has destroyed since the Act became law in 2000.

In 1999-2000, 52,605 files were destroyed, but by 2003-04, the year before the public would be able to ask to see internal papers, the number of files destroyed at the DTI had gone up to 97,020. The Ministry of Defence has also escalated its destruction of files. In a written reply, Ivor Caplin, a Defence minister, revealed that the number of "linear metres" of destroyed files had almost doubled in the past four years. In 2000-01, 1,407 linear metres of records were destroyed compared to 3,211 in 2003-04.

The MoD has admitted that the volume of files "centrally reviewed" for destruction has also risen in the past two years. In 2001-02, 1,787 linear metres of records were reviewed for shredding. But by the following year the number of files reviewed increased dramatically to 3,707 linear metres of records, most of which were destroyed. In 2003-04 the number reviewed for shredding was 3,649, of which 3,211 were destroyed, far higher than in previous years.

At the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, civil servants have been working hard to dispose of thousands of files, including those belonging to the old Ministry of Agriculture. They could include compromising details about climate change, GM food and the Government's handling of the BSE and foot-and-mouth crises. The amount of documentation destroyed more than doubled between 2001 and 2003.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has presided over a massive destruction of files in the past three years. In 1999-2000, 15,524 were shredded, but that leapt to 36,885 in 2003-04. Maria Eagle, the minister for Disabled People, said this was "because the number of files created during the preceding five to 10 years also rose". The destruction included files held by the Department of Social Security, which was replaced by the DWP in 2001.

Some departments, including the Department for International Development, have refused to disclose how many files have been destroyed. But at the Department of Culture, Media and Sport and the Treasury the numbers shredded have gone down since the Act became law. At the Foreign Office the number has stayed roughly the same.

Maurice Frankel, the director of the Campaign for Freedom of Information, said: "The Government needs to be more open, and they should do that rather than try to think up dodges or engage in shredding to stop information coming out."

A government spokesman said the advent of the Act meant more files had been shredded because departments had engaged in "housekeeping". A spokesman for the Department of Constitutional Affairs said: "The impending nature of FoI has meant that people have been looking at what state their files are in and they realised they are carrying some stuff which is duplicate or not necessary."

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