

UK moves to extend freedom-of-information laws

LONDON (AP): BRITAIN'S GOVERNMENT should release its secrets sooner, the country's deputy prime minister said last Thursday, proposing reforms to strengthen the United Kingdom's relatively new freedom-of-information law.

Nick Clegg said he wanted to cut the time officials can keep records from the public down to 20 years from the current 30 years. He also said he hoped to expand the scope of law, which now covers United Kingdom (UK) government departments and local councils. Clegg said he wants it to cover more para-governmental bodies, such as Britain's Association of Chief Police Officers and its Financial Services Ombudsman.

He said the moves were intended to "resettle the relationship between people and government."

"We still live in a society where information is hoarded by the few. And, as we know, information is knowledge, and knowledge is power," Clegg said in excerpts released to the media ahead of a speech delivered Friday.

Openness advocates have criticised UK laws for exempting some semi-official bodies and for a three-decade-long wait before government documents – such as briefings, policy documents, and emails sent between ministers – are made public.

Britain's Freedom of Information Act has been on the books for about a decade, far less time than its United States (US) counterpart, which was signed into law in 1966.

US rules on declassification vary depending on the nature of the official information. Presidential records can be obtained through freedom-of-information requests as soon as six years after the end of the president's administration, although some exemptions apply. Classified information is presumed declassified when it reaches 25 years of age.

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A review commissioned by the previous British government said restrictions should be reduced to 15 years. Clegg has settled on 20.

It was not immediately clear when or how the proposed changes would become law. The previous government had also proposed paring back restrictions on government documents, but the reform was never enacted. Clegg said he hoped his changes could be made before the end of the year.

