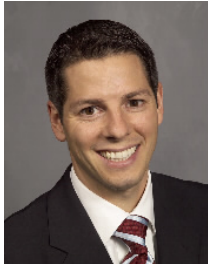


Wednesday, May 3rd, 2006



Feel you have no privacy? You're not alone

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On the Cutting Edge - Brian T. D. Bowman

DO you trust the government with your privacy? I bet that your answer is 'no'. And, you would not be alone.

According to the Manitoba Ombudsman's 2003 Annual Report, which included results from an Ekos Research Associates survey, 60 per cent of Manitobans say they believe that they have less personal privacy than they did in 1998.

More disturbingly, the survey exposed the fact that "a majority of Manitobans believe that 'real' personal privacy has become so eroded that it no longer exists in some respects." Specifically, seventy five per cent of Manitobans "agree that there is 'no real privacy' because the government can learn anything it wants about individuals."

These are shocking and disturbing figures for two main reasons.

Firstly, the delivery of government services such as health care is generally not a matter of choice for citizens requiring services.

Unlike dealings with the private sector, citizens can not simply cross the street to another store if their trust and confidence in government breaks down. We are stuck with the government, whether we like it or not.

Secondly, once we cease having faith in government we stop providing accurate personal information that the government requires in order to provide us with essential services.

In fact, the Ekos survey revealed that 12 per cent of Manitobans have "withheld personal information from a health care provider because of privacy concerns." This almost certainly has resulted in patients being misdiagnosed in the province.

The proclamation of The Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FIPPA) in 1998 and The Personal Health Information Act (PHIA) in 1997 was obviously not enough to completely build our trust in government. Clearly, the government needs to do a better job of allaying our privacy concerns.

That is why all Manitobans should be delighted to see that Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Tourism is hosting a one-day conference tomorrow for government employees at the Delta Winnipeg entitled, "Privacy in the Public Sector: Challenges & Solutions".

Speakers include the Manitoba Ombudsman, Irene Hamilton, and the Saskatchewan Information and Privacy Commissioner, Gary Dickson.

The positive response to the conference from employees of provincial and municipal governments, Crown corporations, health and education sectors has led to it being sold-out, with over 300 registered participants.

This response hopefully demonstrates that the public sector is interested in dealing with privacy issues head-on.

According to the Ekos survey, fifty five per cent of Manitobans believe "that it is more likely than not that they will suffer a serious invasion of privacy during the next two years."

The conference, and other similar efforts to raise privacy issues such as the impending legislative debate on Mavis Taillieu's private members' Bill called The Personal Information Protection and Identity Theft Protection Act, should help to reduce the number of privacy violations in Manitoba.

The Ekos survey exposed the fact that privacy remains a serious concern for most Manitobans. More recently, the Manitoba Ombudsman's 2005 Annual Report declared that the Ombudsman's staff responded to approximately 620 access and privacy inquiries last year.

This all underscores the fact that the privacy violations, or simply the perception of privacy violations, have significant implications for Manitobans and their government.

Let's hope that the conference marks the start of a concerted effort on the part of the government to deal with privacy issues in a proactive and sustained manner.

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