

Proposed bill 'just as bad for the public'

THE Protection of Information Bill could place severe restrictions on the rights of individuals to access information, an advocacy group has warned.

Alison Tilley, the executive director of the Open Democracy Advice Centre, told a gathering of information officers in Johannesburg yesterday that the bill could restrict members of the public access to information such as their own health and tax records, university research and commer-

cial information such as tender documents.

"It is not just a bill targeting the media. It also impacts on ordinary people. It creates complications when people are not entitled to their own records."

Tilley said the bill stood in contrast to the Promotion of Access to Information Act (PAIA), which allows individuals to access public records.

In its submission to Parliament the centre suggests that the bill

only classify information that relates to matters of national security and state bodies such as the police, defence and intelligence agencies.

ODAC also suggested that penalties stipulated in the bill should apply to those responsible for keeping information secret and to protect whistleblowers.

The Human Rights Commission, which held the conference on International Right to Know Day, said the right to information was

central to a democratic society.

The commission said it was concerned that government departments' poor compliance with the "right-to-know law could be undermined by the proposed bill".

"This has the potential to dilute the effectiveness of PAIA, which is one of the few ways in which ordinary people are empowered to hold the government accountable for service delivery," the HRC said in a statement. – *Namhla Tshisela*

