

\$1m to censor speech

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A GATEKEEPER who advises public servants on exemptions to Freedom of Information requests has been paid almost \$1 million by state taxpayers.

Lawyer Mick Batskos, a consultant to all levels of government on FoI, has pocketed \$972,386 since the Coalition took office in December 2010.

Mr Batskos is regarded in government circles as a "guru" with an encyclopedic knowledge of how best to utilise exemptions in the Act.

Mr Batskos, through his companies FOI Support and FOI Solutions, was paid to advise Victorian government departments on how to handle embarrassing or sensitive FoI requests from the public, the Opposition and the media.

FoI laws give taxpayers the right to information held by the Government.

Each government department has a number of staff whose responsibility it is to process FoI requests, but on top of this, the Government forked out large sums of money for Mr Batskos's expertise.

A *Herald Sun* FoI application to all departments found FOI Support and FOI Solutions charged the State Government \$972,448 from December 1, 2010, to May this year. And the figure could be higher because Mr Batskos also represents agencies and authorities which were not part of the *Herald Sun* request.

The Department of Justice spent almost \$370,000, while the Department of Primary Industries (now DEPI) paid more than \$250,000.

Mr Batskos declined to



Lawyer Mick Batskos

comment when the *Herald Sun* provided his firm with a number of detailed questions about his work for the Government.

Monash University governance expert Ken Coghill said the Government's "appalling waste of public funds" was likely just the tip of the iceberg.

"It's extraordinary that a Coalition who complained bitterly about the former government — and who indicated they were going to be transparent — should be caught red-handed doing everything in their power to block access to public information," said Associate Professor Coghill, a former Labor speaker.

Government spokesman Mark Lee said Mr Batskos was appointed by the previous Labor government as part of a panel of legal experts, and retained by the Coalition.

"In addition to providing legal advice to departmental FoI officers, Mr Batskos — along with others on the panel — has also represented government departments and agencies at VCAT hearings when departmental FoI officers have been unable to do so," Mr Lee said.

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