Panel on Home Affairs

Background brief prepared by Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 9 February 2007

Reports published by the Law Reform Commission on privacy

Purpose

This paper gives an account of the past discussions held by the Panel on Home Affairs on a series of reports published by the Law Reform Commission (LRC) on various aspects of privacy since the first Legislative Council (LegCo).

The right of privacy

2. The right of privacy is protected under Article 30 of the Basic Law (BL) which provides -

"The freedom and privacy of communication of Hong Kong residents shall be protected by law. No department or individual may, on any grounds, infringe upon the freedom and privacy of communication of residents except that the relevant authorities may inspect communication in accordance with legal procedures to meet the needs of public security or of investigation into criminal offences".

3. Article 39 of BL also provides that the provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), as well as the provisions of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, shall be implemented through the law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR).

4. Article 17 of ICCPR provides that -

(a) no one shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to unlawful attacks on his honour and reputation; and
(b) everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.

5. Article 17 of ICCPR is replicated as Article 14 of the Hong Kong Bill of Rights. However, the binding effect of the Hong Kong Bill of Rights Ordinance (Cap. 383) applies only to the Government and all public authorities, as well as any person acting on behalf of the Government or a public authority.

6. In its concluding observations issued on 30 March 2006 after consideration of the second report of HKSAR in the light of ICCPR, the United Nations Human Rights Committee has expressed concern that no clear legislative framework exists regarding the capacity of law enforcement agencies to intercept communications and carry out covert surveillance. The Committee has recommended that HKSAR should enact legislation on the matter which is in full conformity with Article 17 of the Covenant and provide a mechanism of protection and redress to individuals claiming interference with their privacy or correspondence.

LRC Reports on privacy

The LRC Report on Protection of Personal Data

7. On 11 October 1989, the then Attorney General and the Chief Justice referred to LRC for consideration the subject of privacy. The Commission had appointed a subcommittee to examine the state of the law and to make recommendations.

8. LRC published a report entitled "Reform of the Law relating to the Protection of Personal Data" in August 1994. Most of the recommendations in the report had been implemented with the enactment of the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance (Cap. 486) on 3 August 1995. The Ordinance protects the privacy of individuals in relation to personal data only.

The LRC Report on Regulating the Interception of Communications

9. In April 1996, LRC published a consultation paper entitled "Privacy: Regulating Surveillance and the Interception of Communications" for public consultation. In December 1996, LRC published a report entitled "Privacy: Regulating the Interception of Communications". In its Report, LRC concluded that the existing provisions of the Telecommunication Ordinance (Cap.106) and the Post Office Ordinance (Cap. 98) in relation to interception of communications did not accord with the requirements of Article 17 of ICCPR. LRC also recommended a regulatory framework for the interception of communications.

10. In its Consultation Paper on the Interception of Communications Bill published in February 1997, the Administration advised that it had accepted the key recommendation of LRC that a judicial warrant system should be introduced to regulate interception of communications.
11. On 28 June 1997, the Interception of Communications Bill, a Member's bill introduced by Hon James TO, was enacted as the Interception of Communications Ordinance (Cap. 532) (IOCO). IOCO provided laws on and in connection with the interception of communications transmitted by post or by means of a telecommunication system and repealed section 33 of the Telecommunication Ordinance. The Chief Executive had not appointed a day for IOCO to come into operation.

12. The Interception of Communications and Surveillance Bill was introduced into LegCo on 8 March 2006. The Bill sought to regulate the conduct of interception of communications and the use of surveillance devices by law enforcement agencies. The Bill also proposed to repeal IOCO and section 13 of the Post Office Ordinance and to amend section 33 of the Telecommunications Ordinance. The Bill was passed on 6 August 2006 and the Interception of Communications and Surveillance Ordinance came into effect on 9 August 2006.

Other LRC Reports on privacy

13. LRC has also published a series of consultation papers and reports relating to various aspects of privacy as listed below -

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<td>(a) Consultation paper</td>
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<td>render the pursuit of a course of conduct causing another person alarm</td>
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<td>(b) Report in October 2000</td>
<td>or distress a criminal offence and a civil wrong.</td>
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<td>Civil Liability for Invasion of Privacy</td>
<td>(a) Consultation paper in</td>
<td>The Report recommends the creation of specific torts of invasion of</td>
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<td>August 1999</td>
<td>privacy by statute to enable an individual to seek civil remedies for</td>
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<td>(b) Report in December 2004</td>
<td>invasion of privacy that is unwarranted in the circumstances.</td>
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Privacy and Media Intrusion

(a) Consultation paper in August 1999
(b) Report in December 2004

The Report proposes to establish an independent and self-regulating press commission by statute to deal with complaints from members of the public against unjustifiable infringements of privacy perpetrated by the printed media.

Regulation of Covert Surveillance

(a) Consultation paper in April 1996
(b) Report in March 2006

The Report recommends the creation of two new criminal offences against covert surveillance and the obtaining of personal information through intrusion into private premises.

14. The major recommendations of these Reports are in Appendix I.

Formation of the Hong Kong Press Council

15. In its Consultation Paper on the Regulation of Media Intrusion published in August 1999, LRC expressed, inter alia, concern over invasion of privacy in the process of news reporting. LRC recommended the establishment by law of a body to be known as the Press Council for the Protection of Privacy. According to the preliminary proposal of LRC, members of the Press Council would be appointed by an independent Appointments Commission and the Chief Executive should invite an independent person, in consultation with the press industry, to appoint the members of the Commission. This proposal aroused immediate and widespread debate in the press industry and the community about press freedom, media intrusion and self-regulation of the media.

16. Some newspapers and journalists' associations held a meeting in November 1999 to discuss the need for a self-regulatory body to address the problem of invasion of privacy in the process of news reporting. The industry decided to set up the Hong Kong Press Council (HKPC) on 25 July 2000 to deal with public complaints against local newspapers. Initially, HKPC only dealt with public complaints arising from intrusion of privacy. Since July 2001, HKPC has expanded its remit to also handle complaints concerning prurience, indecency and sensationalism. Member newspapers of HKPC in 2006 include Hong Kong Commercial Daily, Sing Tao Daily News, South China Morning Post, Hong Kong Economic Times, Ming Pao, Wen Wei Po, Sing Pao, China Daily, Ta Kung Pao and The Standard.
17. HKPC had published in December 2001 a consultation paper on its proposal seeking for qualified libel privilege. The Panel on Home Affairs discussed the proposal at its meeting on 14 December 2001. The proposal was not well-received and there has not been any further development.

Past discussions of the Panel on Home Affairs on LRC's reports

LRC Report on Stalking

18. After discussion of the Consultation Paper on Stalking at its meeting on 27 July 1998, the Panel also discussed the LRC Report on Stalking with representatives of LRC and the Administration, journalists' associations, press organizations, women groups and other concern organizations at its meeting on 12 January 2001.

19. Women's groups were supportive of the proposed anti-stalking legislation. Journalists' associations and press organizations, however, had expressed grave reservations over the proposal on the grounds that it might render legitimate news-gathering activities unlawful. They were also concerned that the proposal might result in unwarranted curb on press freedom and freedom of expression.

20. Some members were of the view that, although there might be a need to legislate against stalking, anti-stalking legislation would have the effect of hampering legitimate journalist activities. They suggested that, instead of having a single piece of anti-stalking legislation, the Administration should consider introducing separate legislative measures to deal with specific problems, such as amending the Domestic Violence Ordinance to deal with harassment by ex-spouses and introducing legislation against abusive debt collectors. These members were concerned that the proposed legislation might cast the net too wide by criminalizing problematic behaviours which could be resolved by other means such as counseling.

21. In response to the concern raised about press freedom, representatives of LRC explained that it was an extremely difficult task to balance press freedom and the interests of individuals who suffered genuine physical and emotional stress as a result of stalking behaviours. Sufficient protection had been provided for in the proposed legislation, such as the defence of showing that the pursuit of the course of conduct was reasonable in the particular circumstances. They pointed out that stalking was a social problem which could not be fully addressed by amending the Domestic Violence Ordinance because many stalkers bore no relation to the victims. To legislate against certain trade or profession would not entirely resolve the problem of stalking either.

22. The Administration advised the Panel that, given that the Report touched upon a wide range of issues which were dealt with by various bureaux, the Home Affairs Bureau (HAB) had taken on a co-ordinating role. The Administration would consider carefully the community's views, including the Panel's, before deciding on the recommendations in the Report.
LRC Report on Civil Liability for Invasion for Privacy
LRC Report on Privacy and Media Intrusion

23. The Panel on Home Affairs held a meeting on 8 November 1999 to discuss the Consultation Papers on the Regulation of Media Intrusion and Civil Liability for Invasion of Privacy respectively with representatives of LRC and the Administration, journalists' associations, press organizations and other concern organizations. The Research and Library Services Division of the LegCo Secretariat also prepared a research report entitled "The Regulation of Media Intrusion of Privacy: the Experiences in Taiwan, the United Kingdom and the United States" (LC Paper No. RL01/99-00 dated 5 November 1999) to facilitate members' discussion.

24. Some members expressed reservations about the need for the setting up of the proposed Press Council for the Protection of Privacy since the court could adjudicate cases of media intrusion in the light of existing legislation, e.g. the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance. They were concerned that a Government-appointed Press Council vested with sanction powers would have adverse impact on press freedom. These members urged that the press industry should expedite the progress of putting in place a self-regulatory mechanism in order to address the public's concern about professional ethics of the industry.

25. Representatives of LRC explained that, whilst there was no argument about the importance of freedom of speech, it was necessary to strike a balance among different rights and interests as all rights were limited. Since the common law did not provide adequate protection against infringement of privacy by the media, it was considered necessary to propose a remedy in law which was acceptable to the community and adequate to address the problem of media intrusion. A Press Council without sanction powers would be tantamount to "a tiger without teeth". They considered that the community in Hong Kong generally had little faith in self-regulation by the media because the three most popular newspapers had shown little inclination to be involved in the self-regulation process.

26. In its Report on Privacy and Media Intrusion published in December 2004, LRC has revised its proposals regarding the proposed Press Council for the Protection of Privacy to address the concern about possible Government intervention. According to the LRC's revised proposals, the Chief Executive must appoint any member nominated by the various constituencies on a proposed statutory Commission unless there has been a procedural impropriety in the nomination process. The proposed statutory Commission would be a self-regulatory body to protect the public from unwarranted press intrusion and does not have any power to order an apology or impose a fine. Half of its members would be selected by representatives of the press industry and the journalistic profession. The other half would be nominated by professional bodies and non-governmental organizations.
27. At its meeting on 14 January 2005, the Panel discussed this Report as well as the LRC Report on Civil Liability for Invasion of Privacy with representatives of LRC and the Administration, journalists' associations, press organizations and other concern organizations.

28. While members in general expressed concern about the approach adopted by some journalists in reportage, they considered that any intervention of the Government would lead to doubts about independence and freedom of the press. Some members were of the view that the press industry should be allowed to regulate its conduct as far as possible. Some other members, however, considered that self-regulation of the press industry had not proved to be effective over the years and it was unacceptable that no effective mechanism was available for the public to lodge complaints or seek any remedy when they fell victim to media intrusion. They suggested that the scope of legal aid be expanded to cover libel cases and a mandatory membership of the Press Council might need to be imposed on members of the press industry.

29. Representatives of LRC responded that setting up the proposed self-regulatory Commission which would only have the power to order an offending publisher to publish the Commission’s findings and decision would not violate press freedom in any way, particularly when the publisher concerned would be free to publish an article in its newspaper or magazine contradicting the Commission’s findings. They considered that, whilst self-regulation was clearly the ideal, freedom came with responsibility. When members of the press industry had been given the chance to self-regulate but had failed to respond to it, it was necessary to come up with proposals to rectify the situation. Representatives of LRC also pointed out that it was necessary to balance the rights and responsibilities of mass circulation newspapers with those of low circulation newspapers. LRC had recommended different categories of membership of the proposed Commission to take account of the significant differences in the levels of circulation.

30. On the proposed creation of a new civil tort for privacy, Hon Audrey EU was concerned that the proposal might be too big as an initial step since it was very difficult to define privacy. She suggested that, as an initial step to enhance the protection of privacy, sanctions should be imposed against specific acts committed by the media which were purely intrusive of privacy and unnecessary, such as publishing photos of corpses in suicide cases and of children of celebrities. Representatives of LRC explained that the court would apply an objective test in determining whether there was an invasion of privacy and the subjective views of the alleged victim would not be determinative.

31. As regards the Government's views on the two Reports, the Administration stressed that protection of privacy and press freedom were the core values of Hong Kong and a balance between the two would have to be struck. The Administration would listen to the views of the industry and parties concerned in deciding whether or not to accept the LRC’s recommendations in the Reports.
Recent development

32. When the Panel on Information Technology and Broadcasting discussed issues related to the regulation of pornographic and violent materials transmitted through the mass media and protection against intrusion of privacy by the mass media at its special meeting on 11 September 2006, the Administration advised that, in addition to drawing reference from overseas experience, HAB had proposed to use the concrete proposals of the LRC Reports on privacy (paragraph 13 above refers) as a basis for further discussion with all relevant stakeholders, including LegCo Members, the media and the general public. HAB planned to take the LRC proposals to the Panel on Home Affairs again for further discussion.

33. Hon Andrew LEUNG moved a motion on "Introducing legislation to regulate clandestine photo-taking" at the Council meeting on 18 October 2006. The motion as amended by Hon Albert HO was carried, the wording of which is in Appendix II.

Relevant papers

34. A list of relevant papers and minutes of meetings is in Appendix III.
Appendix I

Major Recommendations of the LRC Reports on Privacy

I. LRC Report on Stalking (Released in October 2000)

- The LRC Report proposed the introduction of anti-stalking legislation, which renders the pursuit of a course of conduct causing another person alarm or distress a criminal offence and a civil wrong.

- It should be a defence for a defendant who is charged with the offence of harassment to show that:
  - the conduct was pursued for the purpose of preventing or detecting crime;
  - the conduct was pursued under lawful authority; or
  - the pursuit of the course of conduct was reasonable in the particular circumstances.

II. LRC Report on Civil Liability for Invasion of Privacy (Released in December 2004)

- The LRC Report recommended, among others, that specific torts of invasion of privacy which clearly define the act, conduct and/or publication which frustrates the reasonable expectation of privacy of an individual without justification should be created by statute. The Commission recommended that:

  - any person who, without justification, intrudes upon the solitude or seclusion of another or into his private affairs or concerns in circumstances where the latter has a reasonable expectation of privacy should be liable under the law of tort if the intrusion is seriously offensive or objectionable to a reasonable person;
it should be a defence to an action for the intrusion tort to show that the act in question was necessary for:

a. the protection of the person or property of the defendant or another;

b. the prevention, detection or investigation of crime;

c. the prevention, preclusion or redress of unlawful or seriously improper conduct; or

d. the protection of national security or security in respect of Hong Kong;

- any person who, without justification, gives publicity to a matter concerning the private life of another should be liable under the law of tort if the publicity is of a kind that would be seriously offensive or objectionable to a reasonable person, and he knows or ought to know that the publicity would be seriously offensive or objectionable to such a person;

- it should be a defence to an action for unwarranted publicity to show that the publicity was in the public interest.

III. LRC Report on Privacy and Media Intrusion (Released in December 2004)

- The Report proposed to establish an independent and self-regulating press commission by statute to deal with complaints of unjustifiable infringements of privacy perpetrated by the print media. The Commission should have jurisdiction over all newspapers and magazines.

- The Commission would consist of “Press Members” representing and nominated by the press industry and the journalistic profession; and “Public Members” representing the public and victims of press intrusion, and nominated by professional bodies and non-governmental organizations specified in the legislation, except for the retired judge who should be nominated by the judiciary.

- The Commission must draw up a Press Privacy Code, which must make allowances for investigative journalism and publications that can be justified in the public interest.
• The Commission would have powers to deal with complaints about breaches of the Code by newspapers and magazines. However, it should not have a power to compel a journalist to give evidence and to disclose his source of information, award compensation to a victim, impose a fine on an offending publisher, or order an offending publisher to make an apology.

• The Commission may advise, warn or reprimand an offending publisher, and require it to publish a correction or the Commission’s findings and decision. Where an offending publisher fails to publish a correction, or the Commission’s findings and decision, the Commission may apply to the Court for an order requiring the publisher to take any specified action.

• A publisher aggrieved by an adverse decision of the Commission should have the right to appeal to the Court of Appeal.

IV. LRC Report on Covert Surveillance (Released in March 2006)

• The LRC Report recommended that a legislative framework should be set up to regulate covert surveillance and the obtaining of personal information through intrusion into private premises.

• Specifically, the Report recommended the creation of two new criminal offences:

  - it should be an offence to enter or remain on private premises as a trespasser with intent to observe, overhear or obtain personal information;

  - it should be an offence to place, use, service or remove a sense-enhancing, transmitting or recording device (whether inside or outside private premises) with the intention of obtaining personal information relating to individuals inside the private premises in circumstances where those individuals would be considered to have a reasonable expectation of privacy;
These offences will apply to all persons, though a law enforcement agency will not be liable where it has obtained a warrant or internal authorization for the surveillance in question.

- In respect of private premises used as living accommodation, there should be an express prohibition on covert surveillance in changing room, rooms used wholly or in part for sleeping accommodation, and any toilet, shower or bathing facilities, other than where authorized by a warrant or internal authorization.

- It shall be a defence to the proposed surveillance offences that the accused had an honest belief, and there were reasonable grounds for believing, that:
  - a serious offence had been, or was being committed;
  - the law enforcement agencies would not investigate or prosecute that offence;
  - evidence of the commission of that serious offence would be obtained through surveillance, and could not be obtained by less intrusive means; and
  - the purpose of the surveillance was the prevention or detection of a serious offence.
Motion on
“Introducing legislation to regulate clandestine photo-taking”
moved by Hon Andrew LEUNG Kwan-yuen
at the Legislative Council meeting of Wednesday, 18 October 2006

Motion as amended Hon Albert HO Chun-yan

“That, as there are from time to time complaints about serious invasion of personal privacy by some media organizations and earlier on, peep photos of a female artiste changing her clothes had been taken and published by a magazine which seriously invaded the privacy of the artiste and trampled on women’s dignity, thereby causing a great public outcry; this Council urges the Government to expeditiously take measures, including:

(a) reviewing the imposition of sentence under the existing Control of Obscene and Indecent Articles Ordinance and its overall implementation so that penalty with deterrent effect is imposed on the offenders;

(b) studying the proposals on criminalizing the invasion of privacy, establishing a self-regulating commission and enacting additional civil tort law on privacy on the basis of the recommendations made by the Law Reform Commission on the protection of personal privacy in March this year and December 2004, and encouraging in-depth discussion among the media, the performing arts sector and the general public about the contents of the bill concerned; and

(c) urging the media to exercise more self-discipline,

so as to strike a proper balance between protection of personal privacy and freedom of the press.”
### Relevant papers on Reports published by the Law Reform Commission on privacy

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Council Business Division 2  
Legislative Council Secretariat  
6 February 2007