

David Cameron accused of 'governing from the gloom' over bid to scrap Freedom of Information Act

David Cameron has been urged to scrap his review of the Freedom of Information Act and instead strengthen the legislation to give voters a greater insight into the Government's work.

Accusing the Prime Minister of wanting to "govern from the gloom," deputy Labour leader Tom Watson has described the review of the transparency legislation out of touch with the public's desire for more openness, a "waste of taxpayers' money" and "predestined" to recommend raising barriers to obtaining information.

He claimed Mr Cameron was trying to "reverse the transparency Labour introduced" and seeking to "turn off the lights, systematically making it harder for people to engage with policy making, retreating into a darker and more secretive place".

Labour would strengthen and extend the FOI Act, he said, which was brought in by Tony Blair but who later admitted the legislation was his biggest regret.

Mr Cameron was criticised for appointing a commission full of opponents of the Act to look into reforming the legislation, including former Home Secretary Jack Straw, a vocal critic of the law despite playing a role in introducing it.

Mr Watson's attack on the Government's review comes after the former head of the civil service Lord Kerslake dismissed claims that the FOI Act had a "chilling effect" on civil servants.

In a speech in central London, Mr Watson will accuse Mr Cameron of contradicting his pledge as opposition leader when he said "sunlight is the best disinfectant" and promised the Tories would "bring the operation of Government out into the open".

"As Prime Minister he is methodically closing all the doors and the shutters, drawing the blinds and the curtains, retreating to the shadows at the back of the national farmhouse," Mr Watson said.

"He wants to govern from the gloom in the old fashioned way, without the inconvenience of scrutiny, abandoning any hope of decency or trust."

Mr Watson cited NHS England's announcement that weekly bulletins on the health service's performance over the winter will no longer include figures on four-hour waits in A&E departments, the number of ambulances queuing outside hospitals or operations cancelled at the last minute.

"His response to the crisis in our health service has been to introduce an NHS news blackout," Mr Watson said.

"He thinks we won't like what they're doing, so they're going to stop telling us about it."