

Government Transparency and the New Democracy

On what issue does The Courier-Journal agree with a free-market think tank, the Bluegrass Institute for Public Policy Solutions?

About what issue could Tom Coburn of Oklahoma, the strongest fiscal conservative in the U.S. Senate, and Barack Obama of Illinois, perhaps its most liberal, feel so strongly that they would co-sponsor legislation to address it?

The answer to both these questions is transparency in government, which is allowing citizens free and open access to see how government operates and spends their money.

Newspapers regularly publish editorials extolling the virtues of open government, but it has been a little like the weather – everyone talks about it but no one does anything about it. That is changing, however, at least in Washington, D.C. and several states from Florida to Hawaii.

Obama and Coburn joined together to sponsor a bill that requires that an outline of grants and contracts be made available online in a searchable database. Surprisingly, this bill was passed by the United States Congress and the database is now available at <http://www.usaspending.gov/> Further, efforts continue to reduce the number and amount of congressional earmarks.

People have grown disgusted with wasteful pork-barrel spending and plain inefficiency. We must eliminate the secrecy that surrounds government spending. Allowing the people to see how government is spending their money would encourage a return of responsibility to government. Whether you are a person who believes in less government or one who believes that more money should be directed toward education and social services, we can all agree that reducing wasteful government spending is in everyone's best interests.

By making school board, city, county and state government expenditures available on the internet, we will empower reporters, students, retirees or virtually any citizen with a computer or a library card to bore in and identify wasteful spending.

Transparency has a natural ally in the media. Journalists thrive on openness. No more waiting around for sanitized sound-bites coming through government press releases and made-for-TV events. Much of what the media watchdogs need could be obtained online, without the hassle of filing open-records requests.

Given the state of technology, anything for which a state or local government contracts or otherwise spends money on could be accessible at any time. Toward that end, a Kentucky state representative introduced the Taxpayer Transparency Act of 2008, which would have required the state to set up and maintain a single, searchable Website containing expenditures in excess of \$5,000. (The bill exempted from disclosure payments of government assistance to individuals.) The bill would have allowed requests for additional information and required all state agencies to comply with those requests.

Most of this information is already publicly available information, accessible by state employees, but the public can get this information only by sending an open records request, waiting days or weeks for someone to rummage through file cabinets or computer files and then either pay them to copy the material or travel yourself to Frankfort to view it.

So this information-age tool of the new democracy sped through the Kentucky House and Senate, right? Well, not exactly. Although the bill was filed January 8 in the House of Representatives, it didn't even get a reading by the State Government Committee, to which it was assigned, effectively eliminating the opportunity for legislators to go on record as favoring or opposing it. The inaction was hardly an endorsement of open government.

The reluctance to address the issue is especially troublesome since proponents come from all political and philosophical camps and transcends the traditional gulf between liberals and conservatives. Taxpayer and consumer advocates easily agree on this. Grover Norquist, famous for his "no-tax pledge", and Ralph Nader jointly sent a letter to all state governors urging them to make their books transparent. However, during last year's statewide campaigns, the silence surrounding the subject of government transparency was deafening.

We can transform government at all levels by using existing search-engine technology to provide transparency, which will enable citizens to demand efficiency. The old-guard bureaucrats prefer the existing paper-heavy system because it empowers them and is less accountable to taxpayer and media scrutiny. Transparency will empower a renewed democracy.

Kentucky-born U.S. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis once wrote, "Publicity is justly commended as a remedy for social and industrial diseases. Sunlight is the best of disinfectants; electric light the most efficient policeman."

Government pork-barrel and other wasteful spending are symptoms of a disease, which is perpetuated by secretive, unaccountable governments. Contact your state and local legislators, remind them that you are a voter and then suggest that transparency in government is the cure.