

Government owes us transparency

Colin Read: Everybody's Business

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— Machiavelli had it right in his assessment of politics — in his observation, if not in his lesson in morality.

A Renaissance man, a Florentine statesman, philosopher, writer, poet and public servant, Machiavelli lived and wrote 500 years ago and is most remembered for his treatise "The Prince." In "The Prince," he offers the pragmatic, some may call cynical, advice that a public figure must appear to act in public as a pinnacle of ethics and transparency, while he acts in private with secrecy and without ethics. He does so to achieve goals that appear to be in the public interest, but instead advances his own interests and ambitions.

His proposition defies economic sense. Our economy works best when there is transparency and honesty, not posturing and deception.

In the aftermath of a global financial meltdown perpetrated by the few on the many, we all agree that reforms are necessary. The first reform must be a public dialog about how to proceed. After all, we quickly discovered we are all in this together, especially when the bad actors need bailing out. Yet, our public leaders are engaging in the same private wheeling and dealing that we now so condemn among private wheelers and dealers.

New York politics has been long known for decisions made primarily by three men in a room. Now, with new senate and governor leadership, the powerful three have been replaced by just one man. Vermont, too, is complaining of back-room negotiations that have replaced a tradition of open and transparent discussions.

Don't get me wrong. There are rare circumstances that require some confidentiality. In my years of senior management, I can perhaps recount one or two such circumstances. These instances are to protect others, not to deflect managerial accountability.

At other times, we proffer a white lie to protect the innocent. For instance, we do not tell half of our children that they are below average, even though half are, by definition. And we try to maintain hope, even against daunting odds, to motivate others, rather than protect ourselves.

Then there is the rare circumstance in the corporate world where secrecy is required to protect intellectual property from the spying eyes of competitors.

Issues of national security aside, such examples almost never apply to the public sector, though. Our public servants are appointed to serve us, with honesty and transparency. We have the right to know what they are brokering on our behalf, and who may be harmed or helped through their deliberations.

Instead, public budget discussions are shrouded in secrecy. These backroom discussions seem designed to provide cover for our public servants from the harsh response of special-interest groups or from groups that may be harmed as we try to reinvent ourselves. Secrecy also allows our officials to claim they supported our

position but were overruled by others behind the shroud.

Our public servants deliberate in secret to protect their own political future, under the guise of protecting us.

As an example that hits close to home, we all have witnessed a very difficult tenure decision for the principal of a local high school. I have no child in that school and have no knowledge of the various issues or factions. I offer only one observation.

The tenure decision was made privately by less than a dozen public servants and officials for this most public position affecting thousands of parents and students.

Some would be quick to argue that secrecy was necessary to protect the privacy of the tenure candidate. I do not agree. First, in this case, the tenure candidate has stated that he is willing to share the issues with the public. Presumably, he is in the best position to determine if he needs the protection of confidentiality. Second, while we may adopt a procedure for secrecy in personnel matters in private dealings, all public figures know they are held to a more transparent standard. We have a public interest in the affairs of our public leaders as their actions reflect on our public institutions.

Every public leader understands this scrutiny, just as corporate leaders understand the interest of shareholders in their deliberations and actions. One who is willing to serve in a leadership capacity in a public institution owes to all stakeholders a level of ethics and transparency that lends us confidence in their leadership.

Secrecy and backroom dealings are poison to the public trust. Such actions make us cynical and mistrustful. It reminds me of the arrogant comments of Jack Nicholson, portraying Colonel Nathan R. Jessep in "A Few Good Men." The memorable lines are a retort to Tom Cruise's character, who demands a truth to which he feels entitled. Jessep responds, "You can't handle the truth! Son, we live in a world that has walls. And those walls have to be guarded by men with guns. Who's gonna do it? You?" Yes, us. We do not live in a civil society that needs to be guarded by guns and secrecy. Life is not war. Our Declaration of Independence, constitution, and amendments are based on the assumption that we are given a level playing field that draws out the best in us in our pursuit of happiness. Domestic public secrecy to avoid public backlash is an anathema to the marketplace for ideas and open debate.

So, let us expect more from those honored to serve us. Let us witness those backroom discussions that will define our collective economic fate.

In return, we must call off the barrage of lobbying that attempts to unfairly influence our public servants through promises of personal or political gain or through threats if a public servant instead makes the hard decision in the public interest but contrary to the wishes of those who sign the lobbyists' paychecks.

Open public discussion is an economic issue. Transparent information makes for good decisions while secrecy merely shields public servants from accountability. We need to regain faith in our public leaders. After all, the principle of open public discourse in a town meeting was the vehicle that helped make this country unique and great. Let us hearken back to the ideal of open debate rather than secret wheeling and dealing in back rooms. Let openness and transparency cleanse our public discourse. That will make all the difference.

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