



Seeing through the 'Web' of secret spending

By Jim Waters

Simon Bolivar liberated South America from its Spanish occupiers during the early 19th century and was often referred to as the “George Washington of South America.” He once said: “Every citizen has the right to maintain vigilance over the public treasury. Its conservation is in the public interest.”

Bolivar knew what he was talking about.

He understood that being attentive to how government spends equates to conserving our tax money.

That’s why taxpayers should call for their legislators to support Rep. Jim DeCesare’s attempt to shine a brighter light on how our tax dollars are spent in Frankfort. House Bill 105, the “Taxpayer Transparency Act of 2008,” would create a Web site listing all state expenditures of more than \$5,000.

“It’s smart government; it’s transparent government,” DeCesare said. “It’s time to let the citizens of Kentucky see how their dollars are spent. This should be a no-brainer.”

It should be. But “no-brainer” can take on a whole different meaning when you connect it to “Legislature.”

The current legislative leadership seems to have no problem keeping folks in the dark about \$18-billion budgets. During the last budget session, chairman Harry Moberly and the political leadership in Frankfort held marathon sessions behind closed doors and with armed guards present.

Not only were reporters denied access to the discussions, but lawmakers who lacked the seniority to gain induction into Frankfort’s Good Ole’ Boy’s Club presumably would have been denied entrance had they showed up.

If Bolivar lived in Kentucky now, we might consider another revolution. But this kind of revolution would swap muskets and swords with technology, and with the same result – forcing more open government down the throats of irresponsible politicians until they either gag or cry “uncle” and let the people in on the action.

As DeCesare told me: “A little bit of transparency goes a long way.”

It’s true. Take, for example, what happened after the Bluegrass Institute for Public Policy started putting lawmakers’ missed votes online on it KentuckyVotes.org Web site in 2006.

During the 2005 General Assembly – before the advent of KentuckyVotes.org – legislators in the House and Senate missed a combined total of 2,999 votes. After the politicians learned the public could watch online, an amazing thing happened: many of their voting records significantly improved, including a 54-percent drop in the overall number of missed votes between 2005 and 2007.

Just like a bit of transparency caused legislators to do their jobs and cast votes, I'm betting that, like Bolivar said, shining the light on spending would result in the "conservation" of the treasury by restraining legislators as they spend our money.

Opening it up would allow citizens and government-watchdog groups to have the information needed to make government accountable and hold down spending. The CIA-like atmosphere in Frankfort around budget time these days does just the opposite.

For example, it's impossible to measure the veracity of former Gov. Ernie Fletcher's claim of a budget surplus. Conversely, is the cupboard as bare as his replacement claims? Who knows?

The citizenry cannot "maintain vigilance" over the treasury when those same citizens don't know enough about what's happening with their money – who it's being doled out to and whether those spending decisions are benefiting all Kentuckians rather than just a few who happen to make big campaign contributions or have especially effective lobbyists.

Fiscally conservative policies always serve the best interest of the public (read: taxpayers). But getting some politicians in Frankfort to adhere to fiscally responsible policies – with the money rolling in and out like bets at casinos – is like fighting an entire revolution uphill.

I certainly hope it's not as hard to bring Kentucky's checkbook out of the shadows as it was for Bolivar to defeat the Spanish at Caracas.

Jim Waters is the director of policy and communications for the Bluegrass Institute, Kentucky's free-market think tank. You can reach him at jwaters@bipps.org. You can read previously published columns at www.bipps.org.