



No figurin' why we need secret audit police

By Jim Waters

The road to hell isn't the only path paved with good intentions. So is the corridor to more secret and dangerous government.

I have no doubt that Senate President David Williams, R-Burkesville, thinks a more watchful eye on spending the public's money is a good thing. So, he introduced Senate Bill 188 to create a new legislative agency called the "General Assembly Accountability and Review Division of the Legislative Research Commission" to monitor spending by public agencies.

But it would also expand the powerful, intrusive and secret power of government in a manner exponentially longer than the name of the commission it creates. (Someone looking at "GAARDLRC" would think they landed in the eye doctor's office).

Indeed, I thought news about SB 188 was some kind of joke – like the one about Frankfort politicians who promised not to raise taxes. The bill would create a secret club of lawmakers — many of whom presided over some of the biggest debt-ridden budgets in state history — to serve as omnipotent watchdogs of state government's spending of *your* money.

"Foxes guarding the hen house!" you say. Try Bonnie and Clyde guarding a bank.

Check out this language from the bill about The Eye Chart Commission's auditing: " (it) shall be the exclusive property of the Legislative Research Commission and shall be deemed work product of the Commission and shall not be released or otherwise made public without a vote by the Legislative Research Committee and shall not be subject to discovery, disclosure, or production upon the order or subpoena of a court or other agency with subpoena power."

Yes, ensuring government operates more efficiently, effectively and fiscally is a good thing.

- But holding secret hearings and conducting secret audits is not.
- Creating another large, costly government agency to do audits – the elected state auditor's job – is not.
- Exempting state politicians from all accountability and transparency – another end run past the state open meetings and records law – is not.

For me, red flags shot as high as July 4 fireworks when those pushing for creating the new audit police refused to comment or answer questions about this unnecessary – and meritless – proposal.

Instead of trying to come up with a large government agency that would further reduce the access of the people to how their government spends *their* tax dollars, why aren't Williams and Stumbo focusing their newfound political chum-chummery on laws that create the kind of dynamics our founders intended?

They intended for government to operate for the benefit of the people, not the other way around. Therefore, the responsibility of Williams and Stumbo and every other politician in Frankfort is to make government more transparent. And it's the job of the people – you and me – to use that transparency to hold politicians accountable.

Maurice McTigue, former member of Parliament, cabinet minister and ambassador, helped turn around the economy of New Zealand, a country similar in size to Kentucky and with similar problems. He told the Senate State and Local Government Committee on Wednesday: "Without transparency there can be no accountability."

And without it, no hope exists for restoring public trust in government, which is at an all-time low.

"Transparency and accountability help to inspire public confidence in the governing process," McTigue, who now directs the Government Accountability Project at the Mercatus Center at George Mason University, said. "Secrecy is the reverse of transparency, and secrecy always inspires distrust."

Thankfully, House Speaker Greg Stumbo, D-Prestonsburg, killed the idea before it got irreversible traction from like-minded lawmakers who would love more secrecy but lack the muscle to offer such a bogus idea.

Then he could claim a stake in the axiom: "The smallest good deed is better than the grandest intention."

— *Jim Waters is the director of policy and communications for the Bluegrass Institute, Kentucky's free-market think tank. Reach him at jwaters@freedomkentucky.com. Read previously published columns at www.bipps.org.*