



## **Mr. Bureaucrat, tear down this privacy fence!**

By Jim Waters

Individual citizens have less privacy than the government they fund.

But, as singer-songwriter Bob Dylan crooned: “The times, they are a-changin.”

At least they are in Frankfort, where approval of sweeping transparency requirements was an important accomplishment of this year’s Kentucky General Assembly session that largely got lost in the Medicaid rancor.

In 2009, Rep. Jim DeCesare, R-Bowling Green, could not even get a hearing for his proposed bill designed to make state government more transparent.

But what a difference engaged citizens, full-fledged hearings in the Senate – and perhaps even a newspaper column or two – can make.

Just a few short years later, the [Taxpayer Transparency Act of 2011](#), which requires all three branches of state government along with public universities to put their checkbooks online in a searchable format, passed with overwhelming bipartisan support – a real rarity in Frankfort these days.

Even Rep. Mike Cherry, D-Princeton, who initially refused even to give DeCesare’s idea a hearing in the House State Government Committee, which he chairs, joined 94 fellow House members and all 38 state senators in voting “yes.”

This conversion came after we pointed out in a column published in The (Princeton) Times Leader that Cherry [“made sure the bill didn’t get heard.”](#)

Sen. Damon Thayer, who led the Senate charge, called it one of his “proudest” legislative achievements.

“It allows taxpayers to act as auditors on the way their tax dollars are being spent, but also it has proven in other states and countries that it can lead to less government spending,” Thayer said. “It also keeps the executive branch and bureaucrats more accountable when the legislature is not in session. Once we appropriate the dollars, the power goes to them.”

It was the second consecutive session with an important transparency focus.

In 2010, legislation was passed [forcing the corrupt and out-of-control](#) quasi-government Kentucky League of Cities and the Kentucky Association of Counties – where managers previously used taxpayer-funded credit cards for strippers, escorts and financial mischief – to open their checkbooks.

Hopefully, these positive legislative achievements will provide momentum for even more transparency in Kentucky’s budget process and among other quasi-government agencies.

It’s tough, though, to get some in power to go along. Unelected bureaucrats particularly dislike transparency mandates – as illustrated by this exchange among three bureaucrats on the 1980s British TV sitcom [“Yes Minister:”](#)

A: “What’s wrong with open government? I mean, shouldn’t the public know more about what’s going on?”

B (with a look of disgust): “Are you serious?”

A: “Well, ah, yes, sir. I mean, it is the minister’s policy after all.”

B: “But it’s a contradiction in terms. You can be open, or you can have government.”

A: “But, but, surely the citizens of a democracy have a right to know.”

C: “No. They have a right to be ignorant. Knowledge only means complicity and guilt. Ignorance has a certain (pause) dignity. You don’t just give people what they want if it’s not good for them! Do you give brandy to an alcoholic?”

B: “If people don’t know what you’re doing, then they don’t know what you’re doing wrong.”

A: “I’m sorry, but I am the PM’s private secretary and if that’s what he wants, then . . .”

C: “You’ll definitely not be serving your minister by helping him make a fool of himself. Look at the ministers we’ve had. Every one of them would have been a laughingstock in three months had it not been for the most rigid and impenetrable secrecy about what they were doing!”

That’s why we must work toward the day when, as Reason Foundation senior editor Katherine Mangu-War wrote: [“your government may have as little privacy as you do.”](#)

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