

UNCOMMON COMMON SENSE

By Bill Frayer

Is More Openness Always Better?



In my December column, I referred to Václav Havel's assertion that we should never consider any conclusions to be "self-evident." I was thinking about this recently as I read Fareed Zakaria's 2003 book, *Beyond Freedom*.

In this book, Zakaria makes a case that, although it seems self evident that more openness and more transparency would be a good thing, it is not always so. He draws an interesting distinction between effective government and democratic government. What makes a government effective is its ability to identify and solve problems, provide necessary services to

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its citizens, and plan effectively for future growth. And there are many examples of less-than-democratic governments which, nonetheless, do a rather good job of meeting the needs of its citizens. He cites Singapore and South Korea as examples.

Although a democracy now, for many years South Korea had a well-functioning economy under an autocratic regime. The most glaring example today is China. It is unclear whether, in the long run, their economy can be productive without freedom and openness, but so far they seem to be doing rather well.

In the United States, until the 1970's, many decisions were made in back rooms, in secret. Candidates for public office were often selected in "smoke-filled rooms." The party leaders chose to select the candidates which they thought would have the best chance of winning. In Congress, many bi-partisan deals were made in private, over dinner, and no one knew the details. Few people knew FDR was confined to a wheelchair or that JFK was a philanderer.

Today such secrecy is unimaginable. The public and lobbyists alike are privy to every political deal and lurid accusation. Candidates have little privacy, and politicians are under immense pressure, from the public and from their leaders, to conform to their party's pre-determined talking points.

I remember in the 1970s when some of these changes were occurring. It seemed to me, and many others, that the secret deals which had been conducted in the past were both immoral and undemocratic. In other words, it seemed *self evident* that we would be better served if everything was conducted in a democratic fashion, out in the open. There would be no more secret deals *ala* Lyndon Johnson or Richard Nixon. A new era was upon us.

Now, 35 years later, how well have we been served? Is there such a thing as *too much openness or too much democracy*? Zakaria argues that there is, and I think he may be right. Imagine, for a moment, that political opponents are trying to work out agreement on a contentious tax or health care issue. In the past, they could go into a private meeting and do some serious horse-trading to get something done for the good of the public. Lobbyists would have to wait, like everyone else, for the outcome of the negotiations. The politicians could come out, announce the deal, and tell the lobbyists, "Hey, I did my best. This is the best deal we could get." Today, all subcommittee hearings are open to the public and to the lobbyists; all deals must be made in the open. The

result is polarization and often complete impasse. Media cater to specific ideological positions, and the politicians pander to their base. Nothing gets done.

To be fair, Zakaria does not argue for a return to complete secrecy, but he does make the case that although it may seem self-evident that more democracy is better, it's simply not always true. Sometimes, secret deals do work well.