

Government Transparency

By David Beagan

I remember when caller id was first being offered as an option on home telephones. There was a bit of an uproar over the perception that this would violate the privacy rights of people placing calls. I never quite understood why calling someone anonymously was a privacy right. Nevertheless, the ability to block the caller id from displaying on the phone of the person you are calling was implemented, dial *67 before making a call. Right or wrong, this does illustrate that fact that there is a deep seated desire in all of us to keep a part of ourselves hidden from the outside world, and to have control over what is revealed about us.

At the primal level this is undoubtedly what is at work when people in government and people in politics wish to shield their activities from the public. In the case of individual privacy, it makes sense to err on the side of privacy. However with government activity, it should be the other way around. Governments and politicians are funded by they people — governments entirely funded by the people, politicians mostly so.

I guess there have always been dirty politicians, politicians lacking character, and some that are just plain stupid. Whenever this ilk somehow slips through the election process to achieve office, we must be given every opportunity to identify them and deal with them. It is natural to think that it is worse now than ever — maybe it just seems that way. Examples abound: we have recently had Elliot Spitzer caught with a call girl, who had righteously conducted his role of Governor of the state of New York as a moral reformer. Rod Blagojevich has been implicated in actually trying to sell a U.S. Senate seat, endangering the credibility of a fledgling Barack Obama administration, diverting attention from fixing the endangered the U.S. economy. Presidential candidate John Edwards was found to have had an affair outside of his marriage and allegedly produced a child out of this relationship. Alaska Senator Ted Stevens was indicted and found guilty on seven counts of failing to report gifts, making him a convicted felon. Here in the Tri-county area, former Detroit mayor Kwame Kilpatrick resigned from office as part of a plea deal with the prosecutors for perjury. Mr. Kilpatrick had an affair with his chief-of-staff Christine Beatty, unfairly fired members of the Detroit police force because they were getting too close to discovering this affair, and then lied in the ensuing lawsuit. The lawsuit resulted in an 8.4 million dollar award to the officers, this in a city that has been veering toward bankruptcy for many months. Despite a perfunctory statement of “I take full responsibility,” he remains defiantly self-righteous deflecting the blame for his predicament to others.

These examples of misconduct, and many more too numerous to mention, and others yet to come to light, bear out the fact that as much openness as possible is needed in politics and government. The autumn of 2008 was witness to tremendous economic upheaval in the financial foundations of the U.S. and world economy. The bedrock institutions of our economy, banking and insurance, were found to be crumbling under the weight of bad loans, bad policies, and worse, new-fangled financial instruments created through a process known as securitization that seemed to be able to transform the bad loans into a package that overall was good. The government institutions that were supposed to oversee these affairs were asleep on the job. And the SEC must have been in a coma to ignore the warning signs, warnings and documentation provided by outside investments analysts, that the Bernard Madoff investment empire was built on a house of cards. This was a huge operation, perhaps as big as \$50 billion dollars, that ultimately hurt thousands of investors, costing some of them their life savings. Some of the individual stories are heart wrenching.

Whether through moral failings or incompetence, government is not the answer. But wherever government action is deemed necessary, as much as possible the activities of government must be open to public scrutiny.

The economic ills we suffer have come upon us over several decades. They will not go away in days, weeks, or months, but they will go away. They will go away because we as Americans have the capacity now, as we've had in the past, to do whatever needs to be done to preserve this last and greatest bastion of freedom.

In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem. From time to time we've been tempted to believe that society has become too complex to be managed by self-rule, that government by an elite group is superior to government for, by, and of the people. Well, if no one among us is capable of governing himself, then who among us has the capacity to govern someone else? All of us together, in and out of government, must bear the burden.

Today, nearly 28 years after President Reagan uttered these words at his first inaugural address, can we deny their truth? The Obama administration is set to embark on a government stimulus package that would have been unimaginable at the

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time of Reagan's speech. – and possibly surpassing Roosevelt's New Deal which some have concluded actually extended the depression by as much as seven years.

Nevertheless, the people have spoken, have voted for Barack Obama and voted for his approach to solving our economic recession. Though his approach is diametrically opposite to Reagan's, we can be hopeful that some good can come out of it. Such huge governmental outlays can result in inflation further in the future and disrupt our market-based economy ultimately prolonging the misery. But I am encouraged that some good can come out of this big-government approach even if it does trade off future prosperity for short term benefits. The huge danger here is for there to be incredible waste through incompetence, greed, and fraud. Unprecedented openness is an absolute necessity.

The people implementing Obama's plan, politician's and governmental workers, will need to conduct the execution of the plan with greater character and competence than was shown by the likes of Spitzer, Blagojevich, Stevens, and Kilpatrick. A tepid approach, akin to an SEC level of oversight or a FEEMA level of action in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, will not get the job done. The best indicator of the success of this inconceivable governmental action of incredible magnitude, will be the openness of the planning an execution process. The politicians need to set aside their impulse for secrecy because of their desire to shield themselves of negative political fallout. Governmental bureaucrats must suppress their need to appear above reproach, and make this the most open process in the history of governmental actions. We must depend on the press to not forget their priority is to ardently seek the truth and not kowtow to any political ideology. Only if the politico-governmental establishment is intensely aware of public scrutiny will they be motivated to apply their best and most honest efforts to successfully execute this unprecedented governmental action.



Chandrayaan brings science, faith together in India

(Reprinted from Indo-Asian News Service)

Chandrayaan is on its way to the moon, regarded by many Indians as a god, but 'devout Hindus' – many of them, no

doubt, rocket scientists – see no disharmony between ancient Vedic beliefs and contemporary scientific practice", according to a New York Times opinion article.

A week before India's moon mission was launched on Oct 22, millions of Hindu women embarked on a customary daylong fast of Karva Chauth, meant to ensure a husband's welfare, broken at night on the first sighting of the moon's reflection in a bowl of oil, Tunku Varadarajan wrote in the NYT Wednesday.

Reverence for the moon, he said, extends to the website of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), which carries this verse from the Rig Veda, a sacred Hindu text that dates back some 4,000 years:

O Moon!

We should be able to know you through our intellect,
You enlighten us through the right path.

The seeming contradiction between religion and science, between reason and superstition is resolved in India by its "modernity of tradition," Varadarajan writes, borrowing the phrase from the political scientists Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph.

Varadarajan is a professor of business at New York University and the opinion editor at Forbes.com. He notes that the Hindu astrological system is predicated on lunar movements, but clarifies: "The genius of modern Hinduism lies in its comfort with, and imperviousness to, science."

He relates how days after Apollo 11 landed on the moon, a model of the lunar module was placed in a courtyard of the most venerable temple in Varanasi, the holy city. "The Hindu faithful were hailing man-on-the-moon; there was no suggestion that the Americans had committed sacrilege," Varadarajan writes, adding – with a caveat against exaggeration – that science sometimes struggles to co-exist with faith in the U.S. in ways that would disconcert many Indians.

The opinion piece writer then also concedes that India's first lunar mission is no doubt a grand political gesture – space exploration in the service of national pride. "This kind of excursion may provoke yawns at NASA, but judging from round-the-clock local coverage it has received, the mission has clearly inflamed the imagination and ambition of Indians. Yes, even moon-worshipping ones."

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