



WHEN TRANSPARENCY REALLY MEANS TYRANNY

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When you hear the word “transparency,” what comes to mind? Chances are that you associate the word with a lot of good things, like “openness,” “honesty,” “accountability,” and maybe even “integrity.”

In a better world, those associations would be accurate. But in the world of the progressive left, “transparency” means something very different. And you need to be aware of that meaning or you risk becoming a victim of it.

Everybody – on the left and the right – agrees that transparency in government is a good thing. With the exception of issues involving national security, the government should be transparent in its dealings. The public has a right to know what the government is doing with your tax dollars. But transparency means something completely different when it comes to the private, non-government realm. Take, for example, where you choose to donate your money. Transparency in this case means that there is a public record of your donation. Now, this might sound okay, but it isn’t. Why? Because it puts you on the radar of your political opponents and makes you a potential target.

Scott Eckern was a theatre director in Sacramento, California who gave a \$1,000 donation to support the traditional definition of marriage. Maybe you don’t agree with Scott’s position. That’s your right. But the LA Times didn’t just disagree, they put every single donation made by people like Scott online. Scott Eckern lost his job, and others faced boycotts and blacklisting, all because of “so-called” transparency in an area of life that should be private.

Through most of our nation’s history, what happened to Scott Eckern wouldn’t have happened: if you made a political donation, your identity was not exposed. But under pressure from the left, this is changing.

In New York, for example, it’s now the law that if a non-profit organization advocates against a position taken by an elected official, it must disclose to the government the identities of all the organization’s significant donors. Faced with this prospect, most people would just as soon avoid the risk altogether. Safer, in other words, to keep your mouth shut and your checkbook closed.

Even when state officials promise to keep this donor information confidential, you can’t trust them. In 2015, the California attorney general, Kamala Harris, now a U.S. Senator, demanded that nonprofits disclose their donor lists to the state, and then her office “accidentally” posted this private donor information online.

But even if the government kept that information secret, it's none of its business. Because while transparency is a government obligation, privacy is an individual right. How do we know? Because of the First Amendment.

In the 1950s, the state of Alabama tried to force the NAACP, to disclose its membership lists. This demand came at a time when civil rights activists faced physical threats and economic reprisals for standing up for basic human rights. Fortunately, the Supreme Court stepped in and ruled unanimously that the First Amendment protected their right of freedom of association, and that included protection from prying eyes.

Progressives say we need "transparency" to expose the so-called "dark money" behind non-profits and political candidates they don't like. Exactly what those racist bigots said about contributions to the NAACP in the 1950s.

Anonymous speech has been a blessing for this country. Anonymous pamphleteers helped launch the American Revolution. Anonymous writers helped ratify the Constitution. Anonymous activists helped liberate black Americans from the oppression of Jim Crow. But if we're not careful, anonymity will soon be a thing of the past.

If the message is "you have free speech to address the issues, but only if you don't care about the consequences," then fewer people will speak freely. And for those on the left, that's just fine. In fact, that's the intent. Here's what David Callahan writes in the left-leaning journal, *Inside Philanthropy*: "If the donors can't [take the heat], they can choose not to give."

So, now you're wise to the game. The next time you hear a politician or an activist talking about "transparency," ask a simple question: Who should be transparent? If he says the government, tell him yes. If he says you, the private citizen, tell him no. Your speech is your business.

I'm David French for Prager University.