

Book Review

Hood, C & Heald, D (eds) (2006) *Transparency: the key to better governance?* Oxford. Oxford University Press. ISBN 0197263836.

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The photograph on the jacket of this book affords the reader a glimpse through a symbolic glass roof into the innards of the Flemish Parliament. As in the German Reichstag, National Assembly of Wales building and London's City Hall, the glass panes are supposed to represent a transparent 'new politics', which, figuratively as well as literally, "lets the sunshine in". Both the architectural idiom and the political rhetoric are ubiquitous; 'more-transparent-than-thou' is the new 'holier than thou', say the authors, and transparency a new quasi-religion, blessed even by the economic high-priests at the OECD. Therefore, they argue, 'it is vitally important that claims to transparency are tested rather than allowed to go unchallenged'. And from a variety of approaches - including political theory, law, economics, human rights, public administration, and computer science - this is the main contribution of the book.

Their overall tone is interrogative: is transparency a Good Thing? The concept is often blurred with other 'good governance' ideas such as efficiency, accountability, trust, fairness, legitimacy and participation. But which of these are ends and which means? Which are of primary importance and which secondary? And are they all unequivocally and directly linked? Heald explores these issues in chapter 4, 'Transparency as an Instrumental Value'. Transparency is assumed to confer increased knowledge to actors, Heald continues, but can ignorance be useful? Sociologically speaking, as 'a pillar of pre-established social orders', or politically, managing conflict necessitates sending differentiated messages to different parties. Can secrecy be a necessity? It is purported to aid compromise in decision-making bodies, like the EU Council of Ministers, by stopping decision-makers 'pandering' to their constituencies (Stasavage, Chapter 9). When observed, the agent may not act in the 'optimal' way, but according to the wishes of the 'principal', or observer (Prat, Chapter 6).

Doubt is cast on whether transparency measures even achieve their objectives. Where transparency is supposed to improve effectiveness, it can drain resources (Heald, Chapter 4). Where it is supposed to increase trust, it either does not provide enough information for trust-based decisions (O'Neill, Chapter 5), or contributes to a 'rhetoric of secrecy' (Roberts, Chapter 7) and a situation for opponents of government where 'win and you might secure a disobliging revelation about government. Lose and you have a story about official secrecy' (Macdonald, Chapter 8). Instead of nefarious bureaucracy wilting in the sunlight, is it driven into 'ever more secret recesses', as Birkinshaw (Chapter 3) puts it? Roberts describes 'bureaucratic

resistance' to transparency; for example, a failure to create records. This phenomenon has also been described in this journal (Kelly, Vol. 2 Issue 1) and by George W. Bush, 'I don't email (...) and there's a reason: I don't want you reading my personal stuff' (*The Guardian*, 27 October 2006).

The *reductio ad absurdum* then would be support of Official Secrecy, either because of the disbenefits of transparency (the 'jeopardy thesis'), the impossibility of bringing about transparency (the 'futility thesis'), or because transparency achieves the opposite of its objectives (the 'perversity thesis'). These theses are not subscribed to, however. The reader is reminded that Woodrow Wilson and Kant before him believed more openness would lead to fewer wars (Hood, Chapter 1), that politicians use secrecy to avoid taking responsibility for their policy decisions (Stasavage), and that current procedures which effectively turn computer code into law would be better conducted in the open (Camp, Chapter 11).

But lest we forget, McDonald uses freedom of information to remind us of the transparency bottom line: anecdotally at least, people know more. It may almost be a physical battle - for Roberts FOI is 'a tool for regulating the struggle for control of government information'; for McDonald 'it is useful to think of FOI as 'defining the rules of a contact sport. It does not say who will win; but it does rule out certain ploys as illegitimate; and it does give the referee the tools to decide between the competing teams'. As readers – spectators or participants – we are now better informed about the rules of the game.

As a whole, the book successfully unpacks the competing ideas and ideals of transparency. It errs towards 'practical scepticism' and asks more questions than it answers. But in timely fashion, the authors successfully show how light needs to be shed on transparency itself.