

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Op-Ed: Transparency - The Most Important Characteristic Of A Corruption-Free Government

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We hear people often speak about transparency in government and ending corruption. But what does that truly mean? Is there such a thing as a transparent, corruption-free government?

Transparency has been defined as a vital characteristic of a government which mandates clear and open disclosure of information, rules, plans, processes and actions. It requires that persons serving in public offices in government act openly so that citizens have information to hold these public officials accountable. It essentially is a bright light that shines on the actions of public officials to end back room deals and hidden agendas that are contrary to the best interests of the people, and is aimed at ensuring that public

officials are accountable to the people they serve. Its fundamental goal is to prevent or stop corruption. These definitions are provided by Transparency International, a global organization that is one of the leaders in the fight against corruption, and works with countries, businesses, and citizens to stop the practice.

I define transparency more simply: Transparency is an open government that is of the people, by the people, and for the people, and as Abraham Lincoln once said, that type of government will never perish. It is the cornerstone of our democracy in the Virgin Islands and throughout the United States.

What is corruption? There are many definitions but the one most widely accepted by such entities as The World Bank and Transparency International is the abuse of public office for private gain. According to Transparency International, corruption hurts each and every person because we expect and depend on people who are in positions of authority to operate with integrity and honesty.

The people's expectation and demand for a transparent, corruption-free government is worldwide, with some countries having made great strides and ranking higher in transparency than others. Transparency International monitors countries throughout the world and actually ranks them each year for their transparency. The countries that have consistently ranked high for many years are Denmark, Sweden, Finland and New Zealand.

What makes them so-called "cleaner" countries? According to Transparency International, there are at least five reasons. First, their political leaders have a strong anti-corruption commitment. They do not just make grand statements about fighting corruption and bringing transparency, but they take action to actually combat corruption. Second, budget information is openly disclosed, often on websites, which helps stop waste and misappropriation of public funds. Moreover, open disclosure also allows for public input and participation in the budget process.

Importantly, however, the information that is provided is not just dumped into the public arena, with large amounts of incomprehensible raw data. Instead, information is presented in an easily comprehensible format and is timely and accurate.

Third, codes of conduct exist for public officials. For example, Denmark requires that its public officials publish monthly their spending on travel. Fourth, there are strong anti-corruption laws that are actually implemented. It is not enough to have the laws on the books with no enforcement. One of the countries that is ranked amongst the most corrupt in the world is Uzbekistan, which has anti-corruption laws, but intentionally, no resources to enforce them. And, fifth, there is freedom of the press.

Yet another noteworthy fact is that these countries have a very high rate of literacy. They consistently rank in the top countries with the highest literacy rates.

Corruption has many direct negative effects on politics, the economy, and society in general. Specifically, in regard to its negative effect on economic growth, according to Transparency International:

Economically, corruption depletes national wealth. Corrupt politicians invest scarce public resources in projects that will line their pockets rather than benefit communities, and

prioritize high-profile projects such as dams, power plants, pipelines and refineries over less spectacular but more urgent infrastructure projects such as schools, hospitals and roads. Corruption also hinders the development of fair market structures and distorts competition, which in turn deters investment.

In answering the question I posed at the beginning, I take the position that there can be a government that is very close to being fully transparent and corruption-free. Our goal in the Virgin Islands should be to make great strides toward having that form of government. In my next article, I will discuss what, in my opinion, we can do to achieve this.

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