

David S. Broder

# The Case Against Secrecy

It is a bit unusual for a congressional committee to spend \$25,000 of the taxpayers' money to hire a private pollster to tell it what public opinion is. Congressmen are, like journalists, self-appointed experts on everything, and especially on public opinion. Such wisdom, it is believed, goes with the job.

But after reading the 300 page report pollster Lou Harris provided to Sen. Edmund S. Muskie's Intergovernmental Relations Subcommittee on the "citizens" view of American government, the conclusion has to be that the legislators got their money's worth.

The headline-grabber in the study released earlier this week was the finding that the public has more faith in the competence of the people who run local trash collection than it does in those who control television or the press, the Supreme Court, Congress, state and local government or the White House—which finished dead last in the confidence race.

The news that the large and visible institutions of this country — government, the press, corporations, unions, churches and schools—are suffering from a hemorrhage of public confidence is not news at all in the autumn of 1973.

What is news, after years of deepening public cynicism, is that Americans are really not turned off on their "system," but have a clear perception of the changes that are needed to restore it to health.

To quote from Harris's conclusion, "Fundamentally, the American people in this survey are trying to articulate two profoundly held sentiments:

"1. That government secrecy no longer can be excused as an operational necessity, since it can exclude the participation of the people in their own government, and, indeed, can be used as a screen for subverting their freedom.

"2. That the key to any kind of successful future leadership must be iron bound integrity."

Harris argues that "once these preconditions of openness and integrity have been fulfilled, then the time may well come when the people can be approached to make the sacrifices necessary to solve the common problems of the country."

This hopeful conclusion rests on his finding that despite the growing disillusionment of recent years, the public continues to hold a view of government that is skeptical, shrewd, sophisticated—but essentially positive.

Asked if they believe with Jefferson that the less government, the better, most people say no. On the contrary, most approve the proposition that "we need a strong federal government to get this country moving again," perhaps because the rhetoric carries a Kennedyesque connotation of trustworthiness and high purpose.

However, on the question of the distribution of power in the federal system, large majorities say they want state and local government strengthened, while the portion of authority allotted to Washington is reduced.

What this means, essentially, is that despite the disillusionments of the past year, the voters have not forgotten or abandoned what they thought they were voting for in last year's election. That was a vigorous but not all-powerful President who was committed to a deliberate effort, through New Federalism programs like revenue-sharing, to strengthen state and local government.

What they have also said, unmistakably, in this survey and in every other, is that they will not tolerate political

**"Americans have a clear perception of the changes needed to restore the government to health."**

leaders at any level who abuse the public trust by secretive manipulations.

If this finding were well understood by all political leaders—let alone the President—the survey might be of no great moment.

But when a cross-section of state and local officials were asked these same questions by Muskie's subcommittee staff, a majority of them rejected the view that secrecy in government is a serious problem. Harris concluded that "state and local leaders . . . neither sense nor advocate this public mood for opening up government at all levels. . . ."

That is damning news, because the lesson of this study for the officeholders of both parties may well be a lesson of political survival. Indifference to the moral and political imperative for "opening up government at all levels" could well cause the greatest house cleaning of incumbent politicians this country has seen in two generations.

The politicians cannot say they have not been warned. The warning is there in black and white—all \$25,000 worth of it—and it is doubtful the taxpayers will spend much more money to "send them this message." Next come the votes.