

## Book Review : Transparency: The Key to Better Governance?

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### The Reviewers

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Few modern terms have become as ubiquitous as “transparency”, with just about every organisation, from private enterprise to central government, extolling its virtues as a remedy for the perceived ills of secrecy and managerial wrongdoing. As the authors themselves acknowledge, “Transparency is a term that has attained quasi-religious significance in debate over governance and institutional design”. Such is the power of the term that its very mention serves to create an impression of confidence and stability which may not, in all cases, be warranted and this is achieved without any clear understanding of what precisely is meant by “transparency” and what its real implications are for organisations and for the wider community.

For this reason, this stimulating and thought-provoking collection is excellently timed. The work stems from a 2005 workshop (sponsored by the British Academy and ESRC) and brings together eminent contributors from a wide range of disciplines from both sides of the Atlantic to examine various facets of transparency in government and public policy. In doing so, the text seeks to provide a more holistic overview of the concept, from its origins and history, to more fundamental considerations of the true impact of transparency as a tool and as a goal. This is achieved by concentrating on three key aspects of transparency.

Firstly, the contributors consider the history of transparency as a concept and an ideal. There is a temptation to regard the present preoccupation with matters of transparency as an essentially modern phenomenon, however, there is ample evidence that this is far from the case, with examples from a range of nations and strands of political theory and philosophy. In the UK, this culminates in the modern concept of transparency, expressed by Bentham which, in turn, leads to the various strands of transparency as applied to areas such as corporate governance and national/international affairs. In considering this process of development, the authors provide an excellent explanation of some of the key forms of transparency which is invaluable for those new to the topic.

The second section of the book develops this theme of classification further, by questioning whether there is a single concept of transparency or, alternatively, whether the word itself means different things to different constituencies and the extent to which these competing interpretations are compatible or, indeed, contradictory. In doing so, concepts such as transparency “as a human right” and consideration of the ethics of communication go far beyond the usual, purely functional, discussion of transparency as a tool for management or accountability and, as such, represent a truly welcome addition to the debate. Transparency is not simply accepted as beneficial *per se* but rather is examined from the perspectives of the various protagonists, including by means of the “principal-agent” model, thereby providing a far more balanced analysis than is the norm.

It is the final section, however, which raises the most interesting questions of all in its consideration of the impact of transparency at governmental level and with particular reference to the implementation of the Freedom of Information Act 2000. This is a fascinating area and markedly different to the usual preoccupations with corporate governance which characterise many discussions of transparency. The response of government to the statutory requirement for greater transparency is examined in some detail and the authors raise a number of concerns over the lengths to which government departments have gone to evade the provisions and the inclusion of international comparisons is also illuminating and informative. Finally, the text considers the implications of increased transparency within the EU institutions, an area where many would argue that true transparency is long overdue.

In considering the essential nature and future of transparency, the contributors go some way towards answering

the vexed question of how an increasing emphasis on issues of transparency affects organisations, in terms of issues such as decision-making and efficiency, but also in more intangible areas such as candour. The result is an intriguing and provocative analysis which challenges the existing, often one-dimensional, view of transparency which emphasises the positive but fails to acknowledge any drawbacks to the mantra of transparency. This text goes a long way to redressing the balance, with a mature and reasoned assessment of the topic which will be welcomed by observers of politics and business who wish to move beyond the superficial view of transparency as "the pervasive cliché of modern governance". With impressive analysis and comment, together with extensive referencing, this is a valuable addition to the debate and one which will itself provoke further much needed discussion.