

Sunshine is for everyone but the governor

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Whatever it is that Gov. Bobby Jindal wants to hide must be a real doozy, since he is not just out to deny our right to know. He doesn't want posterity to find out what he's been up to either.

In what has become a rite of spring in Baton Rouge, Rep. Wayne Waddell, R-Shreveport, and Sen. Robert Adley, R-Benton, enter the lists in the cause of open government. They will almost certainly wind up in the dust again, but last week Adley's bill, subjecting the executive to public scrutiny, actually made it out of committee.

Chairman Bob Kostelka, R-Monroe, had to break a tie to send it to the floor, but this was a historic victory. The tide may be turning slightly against the administration's toadies in the Legislature.

Talking of history, Jindal does not want the facts to interfere with his place in it. One of the provisions in Adley's bill that alarms Jindal would require gubernatorial records, 10 years down the line, to open.

Imagine how much better we could understand our current condition if governors had been required to preserve records. The Edwin Edwards archive, for instance, would surely have been much more illuminating than the authorized biography he has favored us with. Future generations might likewise find the truth about Jindal instructive.

They never will so long as the current one tolerates a hole-and-corner executive even while the Legislature and local government operate in the light of day. The other states are far more inquisitive about their governors' capers. Louisiana, as Adley says, "has the most closed records in America."

The governor's office enjoyed a blanket exemption to public records laws for decades before Jindal came along vowing a new era of "transparency." His idea of reform, however, was to open up only those records that nobody wanted to see anyway. The veil of secrecy, moreover, was extended to a host of executive branch agencies that had always come clean with the press and public.

Jindal boasted that the new law is "transformational," as indeed it was, for he had turned the truth on its head. Having pulled off the improbable feat of making secretive government even more so, he up and announced he had achieved the opposite effect.

The administration evidently espouses the theory that the masses will believe a lie if it is repeated often enough, and executive counsel Stephen Waguespack hammered the "transformational" line at last week's committee hearing.

Waguespack faced an impossible task, there being no logical explanation for Jindal's opposition to the openness he so often and so earnestly advocates for everyone else. The best Waguespack could do was read extracts from court opinions addressing executive privilege in cases with no obvious relevance to slippery governors.

The law already on the books could not be improved upon, Waguespack explained, because it gave the public all the information that it could possibly need. Unfortunately, however, the public has failed to grasp how gracious Jindal has been, for the Public Affairs Research Council, the League of Women Voters, The Times-Picayune and the Baton Rouge Advocate, for instance, are all clamoring for an end to executive secrecy.

The committee's lickspittle faction, however, argued that efficiency and sound governance would be undermined if nosy voters were allowed to keep tabs on their beneficent masters.

Some governor's office records should indeed remain confidential, as Adley's bill recognizes with exemptions for "executive deliberations" and "intra-office communications." The bill also keeps any information off limits that might threaten the security of the governor or his family.

But the current law requires voters to place more trust in politicians than might be considered prudent. Any records, for instance, related to advice and recommendations on the budget remain confidential for six months -- by which time a budget will always have been adopted.

It is absurd that the public's right to know how its money is spent remains a subject of debate in Louisiana. Jindal, meanwhile, is preparing to publish his autobiography. It is not expected to reveal any secrets -- such as what really goes on in his office.