

Philadelphia

Penn Conference Proves Government Officials Have More Privacy in Public Than the Public Has in Private

Government officials don't want the public to hear the private things they say in front of everybody.

By: Joel Mathis - December 3, 2013

Phawker's Dustin Slaughter has a great piece today about how he tried to go to Penn's conference about government spying and transparency, "On the Very Idea of Secret Laws: Transparency and Publicity in Deliberative Democracy." No, he wasn't allowed to attend the discussions.

In fact, every event during this two day conference – with the exception of Chris Inglis' keynote speech before a packed auditorium the night before – is listed on the university's law department website, yet completely shielded from press and public scrutiny. Furthermore, none of the event listings even have a full roster of attendees. I find a 14-page list of participant bios outside the room. The packet is chock full of representatives from the defense industry, intelligence community, academia, and think tanks such as the CATO Institute. I return near the end of the attendees' lunch break and quickly find CERL's head staff member, Claire Finkelstein. She seems dismayed that I'm actually taking up her earlier invitation. "Is there classified information being discussed here?" I ask Finkelstein.

"No, no classified information, but sensitive topics."

If there's no classified information being disclosed here, why is it closed to the public?

"The main point of the discussions is for policy makers, academics, and others who are involved," she begins, "to enter into dialogue with one another in a way that allows all of us to move up the learning curve, so that we become better-informed academics and policy makers become better-informed."

Given recent NSA revelations, it's worth asking if participants in a public policy conference have more privacy discussing their ideas in public than most Americans have communicating to each other in private. Paranoid question? Maybe. Justified by what we've learned in recent months? Absolutely.

Slaughter goes into detail about the conference's participants, and concludes: "Can we trust that whatever academic treatises, white papers, and possible policy decisions that may come from 'On the Very Idea of Secret Laws' will represent not just the perceived needs of the national security state, but the constitutional rights of the American people as well? Stay tuned." It's worth reading the whole thing.