



Transparency in government: Obama and Pelosi need to let the sun shine in

"Hopes for an effective law that would protect the public's access to essential news from inside government have been dealt a severe setback by the Obama administration."

The lead-in to Rush Limbaugh's latest tirade against the White House?

Not quite. It's the opening paragraph of a [New York Times editorial](#) Sunday, in which the Gray Lady took the administration to the proverbial woodshed for "proposing deep revisions to a Senate Judiciary Committee bill that weaken protections against forcing reporters to reveal their sources."

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The embarrassing tiff between the administration and one of its chief acolytes highlights a fading promise of candidate Obama: granting the public access to what's going on inside government — transparency, for short.

Barack Obama made some very firm commitments about transparency as a campaigner. Among other things, he promised to post bills online for five days before he signs them. That promise has been fulfilled just once, according to the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank that keeps careful watch [on such things](#).

It was the Obama campaign website, mind you, that promised "Sunlight Before Signing." As president, Obama said he would not sign any non-emergency bill without giving the American public an opportunity to review and comment on the White House website for five days.

"[W]hen there is a bill that ends up on my desk as a president," the website quoted candidate Obama as saying, "you the public will have five days to look online and find out what's in it before I sign it, so that you know what your government's doing."

That is not what is happening. A case in point is the \$789 billion stimulus package. The 1,100-page bill was made available to Congress and the public just 13 hours before lawmakers voted on it. And how about the 1,200-page House energy and global warming bill, passed June 26. It was available online 15 hours before vote.

Of the 11 bills Obama had signed by April, only six had been posted on Whitehouse.gov. None was posted for a full five days after leaving Congress for the president's desk.

Now, with Congress gearing up to hammer out a health-care reform bill, pressure is mounting on the Democratic leadership to make the final bill available online for the public to read prior to a vote. It makes abundant good sense, given the public's unusually intense interest in the subject — and the anger with which people viewed Congress' railroading of the stimulus packages.

The nonpartisan [Sunlight Foundation](http://SunlightFoundation.org) thinks it's a smart idea, too. The Washington, D.C., outfit, which fosters transparency and accountability in government, has launched an effort to get Congress to post bills online at least 72 hours before a vote to give the public an opportunity to actually read the legislation.

The idea has generated bipartisan support. Reps. Brian Baird, D-Wash., and Greg Walden, R-Ore., are circulating a petition among House members that would force a vote on the 72-hour proposal. But their effort is running into stiff opposition from Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who is pressuring Democrats not to sign up.

As of Tuesday, 178 House members had signed the petition, including Minnesota Republicans John Kline, Michele Bachman and Erik Paulsen. No Minnesota Democrat is as yet on board. Forty more signatures are needed to meet the 218-signature threshold to force a vote on the proposal, H.R. 554.

Last week, the Senate Finance Committee, bowing to warnings from Majority Leader Harry Reid, rejected a similar effort to make the future Senate health-care bill available for 72 hours before a vote. The amendment was narrowly rejected, 12-11, with Democrat Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas crossing party lines to vote with the 10 committee Republicans.

What's going on here?

"[W]hen it comes to what's wrong with this country, the American people are not the problem. The American people are the answer. The American people want to trust in our government again — we just need a government that will trust in us. And making government accountable to the people isn't just a cause of this campaign — it's been a cause of my life for two decades."

The words are Barack Obama's, spoken in Manchester, N.H., in September 2007.

It's one thing to talk the talk, but the mood these days in the country is grim. The president is remarkably glib and his personal popularity remains high, but public confidence in his judgment and his policies is heading south fast.

People are utterly fed up with business-as-usual in Washington, with the lack of transparency in government and Congress' habitual hubris.

It's time for some genuine "change we can believe in."

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