

Our Government Keeping Secrets

WHILE government is finding out more and more about you and me it is covering up more and more about itself.

Computer data banks in numerous branches of government maintain personal information about people who deal with those agencies. Laws that restrict revelation of such information also permit routine interchange of data between agencies for certain purposes.

That doesn't sound very private. At the same time, information about what government does and how much it costs is being cleverly hidden. Federal agencies may accomplish this simply by marking files "Classified," available only to "authorized personnel."

Oklahoma's "open meeting" law helps greatly but last year efforts to loosen secrecy about background checkups on nominees for appointment to office failed. Undesirable traits turned up could be kept hidden if the governor or lawmakers so desire.

Recently the director of the Office of Public Affairs restricted access

to all documents in his office from public inspection unless he determines the review is justified. Oklahoma's Office of Public Affairs has gone private!

Hospitals and health agencies spend enormous amounts of public money. The Daily Oklahoman has gone into court to try to gain access to records. Allegations have been made that public funds have been improperly disbursed and facts were sought.

Resistance of hospital administrators to permit access to these records certainly does not generate a feeling that everything is on the "up-and-up" in spending public money.

The federal judge who heard the case acknowledged that the public had an interest in the matter because of expenditures of large sums of public funds, but he denied the public the right to learn how the money is being spent.

Individuals usually have neither the time nor the skills needed to examine public records for wrongdoing. It generally is left to private or-

ganizations to dig into them and bring out the facts. If they are denied access, the way is left open for graft, kickbacks, embezzlement or other crimes.

Last year it was revealed that outrageous prices were being paid for replacement parts for airplanes at Tinker Air Force Base. Competitive bidding was stifled, the public was being robbed, and contractors with inside tracks were getting rich.

After the flurry of the investigation was over, what has happened? Until the press digs in again taxpayers may not learn whether overpricing has been eliminated or resumed.

Back at the state capitol lawmakers have cut budgets by \$150 million, mostly in education where the public will notice it most. Has anything been done to reduce political patronage? If so the public should be told. If not, why not?

A fundamental of government of the people, by the people and for the people is that the people know what is going on.