DEMOCRACY IS A TWO-

Somewhere in the dim, dark reaches of the last half century we loosened a crucial grip on control of our lives—the right to determine how much and for what tax money would be extracted from our pockets and emptied into bottomless government coffers. Federal problems seemed so far away, our elected officials seemed trustworthy, and inevitably more knowledgeable about what was needed to deal with large problems than we are. And we shared a dream that a government that could win a world war and develop an atomic bomb could legislate or regulate or delegate away the intractable problems we couldn't bother to get honest enough to resolve.

The right to levy income and other taxes without local approval was a *vast* transfer of power from individuals to government, as we are now learning. The continued funding of government agencies today rests on their pleasing Congress, not taxpayers. Congress has the power to attempt to resolve (or meddle with) any problems—to do most anything it wants —at the federal level without asking if we wish it done or feel that to be the best way to do it.

It's not just federal agencies that are affected. Federal funding for state and local projects, such as freeways, sewage plants, hospitals and schools is set up purposefully to be hard to refuse and to influence use of local funds. If you don't approve a dam or freeway or urban renewal project for which government funding is available, do you get a tax reduction or refund instead? Ha! Your money goes to someone who *is* willing to spend it!

As a result, control of our state and local governments, academic, medical and transportation programs has largely followed the power of our federal tax dollar. Our city and state governments have chafed under federal regulations, but inevitably have found federal dollars safer and easier to go after than going directly to local taxpayers for funds. They also quickly found that such funding sources freed them to pursue their own institutional vision of Utopia without interference from the different dreams of their constituents.

It's not only appalling to discover how far our local governments have put us as individuals and as communities into debt for ill conceived sports palaces, convention centers, utility, urban renewal and other projects—it's also appalling to learn how little say we have in preventing projects and expenditures we don't want. Over one third of the budget of many cities now goes merely to pay finance charges on such projects. The bankers profit handsomely. We pay equally handsomely. The question remains one of control.

Old party politics seem to have shifted around in response to this problem and the trends that have developed because of it. The old conservative stood for personal rights and privileges (particularly those of the more privileged) while the liberal stood for social equity through governmental action. The souring of that sweet dream has brought forth new coalitions straight from *Gulliver's Travels*, the Little Enders—people who seek social equity through individual responsibility and community effort aligned with those who seek personal gain through the same means against the Big Enders, who believe in getting at action from the big end of the egg—those who look yet to big government for personal or social salvation.

by Tom Bender

WAY STREET

But one message seems clear today—people are tired of expensive, unresponsive and self-serving institutions—particularly ones to which we are allowed no alternative. People are demanding control over their tax money and what is done with it. Local tax revolts, for whatever reason, only aggravate the problem—for as we can see in California, our institutional tendency is for the larger bureaucracy to bail out the smaller (and gain control of it) rather than to face and make basic changes in how we do things.

Citizen participation in determining governmental actions may sound like some foggy, sweet ideal, until we realize that according to most reports, China, with a population of nearly a billion people, is already doing just that. Production goals, government programs and community development are arrived at through negotiation and discussion in village, district, county and national meetings, and go all the way back to the individual for ratification, according to reports in *Fanshen*, by William Hinton. If true and the system does work, we've been vastly out-democratized!

Actually, none of this is really any different from the powers we already have to vote on state and local bond issues as well as many special programs. We don't have that option with federal programs and taxes. Why not? If we can't regain that power, we've got to regain control at the other end of the tube. A process that could accomplish some of these goals at that end would be a referendum/rebate system in which a state refusing to participate in a federal-funded freeway program or a community voting down a federally funded fluoridation program would get the allocated funds refunded to the affected taxpayers. Is it an unreasonable dream to have *your* vote count on the CIA budget, nuclear power, neutron bombs and government salaries?

No real balance of power in our society can be achieved unless we regain balance between collective needs and local and individual control over governmental budget and tax powers used to fulfill those needs. Dreams, budgets, programs, and taxes need to be developed through dialogue between all levels of government and the people ourselves, as governments inevitably serve different ends than people, and to remain a democracy, the power must remain with the people. □

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