

Urban Affairs and Fiscal Policy

Questions have been raised as to what JCRC (and JPAC) policy should be on fiscal aspects of legislative bills being reviewed. In other words, under what circumstances should the questions be raised: How much will it cost? Will it cost too much? Where will the money come from?

This is not a relevant question for most of the bills with which JCRC is concerned most heavily, that is: policy bills on church state, ethnic identification, etc. However, they are presumably relevant questions for the social welfare bills which are being considered, out of our concern with the welfare of aged citizens, or the needs of the Jewish institutions, and in our capacity as public affairs arm of the Jewish Welfare Federation.

However, even in these cases, do we just take a position on the principle of a given bill (i.e. for raising OAS grants, or medicare for the aged) or do we also ask the fiscal question?

Consider, on the one hand:

These specific questions are raised: Would it not be irresponsible to support bills which would raise taxes unconscionably? Would it not be irresponsible to support bills which have no chance of passing because of fiscal aspect?

On the other hand, the "expertise" of the JCRC and (and JPAC) does not go to fiscal or taxing matters. Our premise is that we are a community group sensitive to certain social problems; our job is to press legislators to ponder those problems with a greater sense of priority.

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There are certain technical matters which our technical experts at Jewish institutions can make comment on. But the legislators are the ones who must decide on how to implement these matters politically and fiscally.

Therefore, our position on such social welfare matters is to mainly call attention to unmet needs, etc. and to ask the legislators to take such needs into account. It might not be a matter of new financing at all -- it might be a matter of "rearranging priorities: as to expenditure. (But if we tried to suggest where the money might come from, or where it might be sliced from other budgets, etc., we would be trying to do the legislators' jobs.)

This means that when we support a social welfare expenditure bill, we should normally couch our support in terms of the above: "We are supporting this bill in principle, because we have knowledge that there is this unmet social need, which needs more attention".

We might even want to formulate a more explicit statement to add on the fiscal question, e.g.: "We understand that this measure would increase costs, and we are concerned as everyone else about rising government costs. We know that your problem, therefore, is either to equitably find more revenue, or to shift some of the fiscal priorities in the current cost of government. We are urging, however, that, in facing this difficult problem, you take into account the fact that the threat of this bill should have a certain priority in your considerations, because it so drastically affects so many human beings."

In this way, perhaps, the JCRC and (and JPAC) can maintain its basic function of using bills to urge certain directions and priorities, and to point out certain needs, without trying to become fiscal authorities or total legislators.