

What Is the Revolt All About?

Is the California "taxpayers' revolt" a sign of right wing backlash? Are we facing a period of political extremism?

Those terms -- "right wing ... backlash ... extremism" --- have a special alarm for Jews. They are historically associated with Fascism, Nazism, organized anti-semitism. But to paste such simple labels on the recent California Happening would be to miss its significance.

Right-wing backlash refers to a political movement by those who feel that they are losing their special privileges. Left-wing refers to those who feel that a special-privilege class has kept them from ever having a proper piece of the pie. Extremism refers to a political movement, either left or right, which would abandon the democratic process in the pursuit of its goals.

But Proposition 13 was not a political movement at all. It was a populist mood piece. No political leadership or organization emerged from it. The only prominent gubernatorial candidate who took a whole-hearted position in favor of Proposition 13 was defeated in the Republican primary. The authors of the proposition, who have been trying this sort of thing for fifteen years, just stood back in astonishment and watched the tidal wave. They did not really "lead" it.

Nor was there "extremist" ideology present: neither overt bigotry, nor ethnic conspiracy theory, nor attacks on democratic political process. The attack-images were not "too much welfare," or "excessive services to the poor," but rather, "government waste" and "unresponsive politicians." In motivation, this was not so much a punitive expedition against the poor, as a cry of alarm about the over-stressing of the public stem.

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There are many signs of the general concern with bureaucratic government growth. In 1966, 26 per cent of Americans agreed that political leaders "don't really care what happens to you"; but, in 1977, 60 per cent of the population agreed to that statement. The economic aspects of that public sector growth have direct impact on the citizenry. In 15 years, government per capita expenditure has tripled. One-third of all the personal income in the nation now goes into government coffers. The citizenry does not primarily want to dismantle the direct social services it knows about. The current thrust is to stop the public sector juggernaut long enough to find out, if possible, what is and what is not rational, given the burden.

Perhaps there have to be some painful new arrangements. Take the public colleges, for example. From 1950 to 1975, our general population increased by about 40 per cent, enrollment in private colleges increased about 75 per cent, enrollment in public colleges increased about 500 per cent. Perhaps, unhappily, we cannot afford automatically free college any longer. Perhaps it makes sense, on a couple of counts, to charge tuition -- and to make sure that there are ample scholarship provisions for any student who can't afford to pay, and who shows some capacity to profit from college.

Perhaps some welfare services can be handled more responsively and with less profligacy by private voluntary agencies than by public agencies. Perhaps some human behavior can be regulated without public laws and commissions. In any case, this may be a crossroads, a time to turn the trend that government must do everything. The job then would be a massive but surgical reappraisal of what can be excised from the public sector, rather than an unthinking meat-cleaver cut of essential welfare payments, education, or even defense and foreign aid.

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Proposition 13 was meat-cleaverish, as even protagonist Milton Friedman agreed.

But the people will take a meat cleaver if they can't get anything else. Or perhaps it is too late, despite the California flurry, and we are not capable of performing any real surgery on the public sector. In either case, if we do not respond, and respond judiciously, to the real signal of the "taxpayers' revolt," we can only look forward to spiralling dislocations and disaffections which will someday attach to the kind of political extremism we fear.