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Media Out of Fiscal Step, Budget Philosophy Reflects Will of Texas

By Michael Quinn Sullivan

On the only issue that matters, the 78th Legislative Session was a success. Not that any newspaper will notice.

The Texas Constitution requires the legislature to pass a balanced budget. That's the only task we, legally-speaking, require of our elected officials in Austin. Did everyone get what they want? Absolutely not.

While not perfect, budget priorities established this Session by the new leadership clearly reflect the will of Texans expressed at the ballot box: tightly controlled spending, a focus on stability over funds, and a retreat from the spend-and-tax mentality of the political left.

Don't expect to see that on many editorial pages, though. Last year I wrote an article titled "The Statesman Doesn't Matter," which chronicled the declining influence of Texas' big media outlets, such as the Austin American-Statesman. In the early 1990s, 31 percent of Texans read the Sunday edition of the largest papers, today it is down to 20 percent. Why?

Here's a clue: While more than two-thirds of Texans voted for candidates pledging to reduce taxes, most newspapers were calling for (and still are) such dis-

credited ideas as higher rates and new taxes.

Not wanting to confuse readers with facts, editorial pages painted the only solution to the state's budget shortfall as new, higher taxes. Never mind states with income taxes, and higher rates, had far worse budget problems than Texas this year.

The religious fervor with which the state's major media clings to the notion of an income tax borders on irrationality. At one point during Session, a reporter told me she knew an income tax would solve the state's problems. How? She had once re-

ported on economic issues.

She must have forgotten the fact businesses have been relocating to Texas in droves during the last decade because our taxes - while rising - were still below those of many of our economic competitors. Even if she didn't know it, our competitors do. For several years, the difference between high-tax and low-tax states has diminished. Once derided as "tax-chusetts," Massachusetts has been working to lower its rates and become more economically competitive.

So when Governor Perry, Lt. Gov. Dewhurst and the majority of House and Senate members

pledged to work against tax increases, they were doing so with a clear understanding there was simply no alternative: raising taxes will forfeit growth and destroy jobs.

What drives the desire for the media support for higher taxes? The hypocrisy is telling. On the one hand, companies like Cox Texas Newspapers (which owns the Austin American-Statesman, among others) took advantage of the state's tax laws by organizing in a way that has greatly reduced its tax bill. On the other hand, those same publications cry for higher taxes for the rest of us.

Many in the media, parroting cries from special interest groups, see government as the solution to life's problems. The real disconnect, however, is not on taxes at all, but on spending and the philosophy of government.

Those sharing the ideology of many newsroom writers trust government bureaucracy more than people. They quite simply do not trust you and me with our own money, with the power to make moral financial decisions. Government, they wrongly believe, can cure our ills. Need a job? Check with government. Sick? Get on a program. Need help? Pass a law.

Who should help people in

need, government or individuals? And when government helps, what criteria should there be? Almost two-thirds of Texans last November used their vote to demand that taxpayer "help" be truly helpful, going only to those who really need it, and for only as long as necessary.

The majority of Texans know compassion is measured not by how much tax money is spent on questionable programs, or the number of people newly enrolled. Rather, it is found in how many people are liberated from the chains of welfare dependence. Such dependence is economic slavery, bondage that creates many social ills. Economic and political freedom, however, have a curious way of solving a great many of them.

Once relevant to the political life of the state, Texas' major newspapers have become little more than cheerleaders for outdated beliefs and discredited ideas. Fortunately, our political leadership - mirroring the populace - has stopped paying attention.

This time, when the people said "don't mess with taxes," the legislature listened. (Michael Quinn Sullivan is director of media and government relations for the Texas Public Policy Foundation, www.TexasPolicy.com.)