

Let the Texas Majority Rejoice!

By Michael Quinn Sullivan

Legislators should be welcomed home as heroes; they did the will of the people and ignored the naysayers.

While not perfect, the budget priorities established this legislative session clearly reflect the will of Texans as expressed at the ballot box: tightly controlled spending, strict responsibility over funds, and an abandonment of the spend-and-tax mentality of the political left.

After all, two-thirds of Texans voted for gubernatorial and legislative candidates pledging to hold the line on taxes. As a people, we categorically rejected calls for such discredited ideas as higher rates and new taxes. Whenever possible, voters demanded, let those who use a service pay for it.

The solution, the Texas majority knew, to our budget malaise was found in controlling the growth of government, not raising old taxes or implementing new ones.

As the budget battle raged this spring, Texans remained rightly suspicious of legislative commitment. A Texas Poll published in the Houston Chronicle on March 9 found 72 percent of us pessimistically feared the legislature would raise taxes. The burden fell to House Speaker Tom Craddick and Appropriations Chairman Talmadge Helfin to prove our pessimism wrong.

For more than a year, the state's newspapers asked how much and what kind of a tax increase Texans would face. The implementation was a foregone conclusion. (Never mind that states with higher taxes, and with income taxes, faced far worse shortfalls than ours, some newspapers and their ideological friends still cling to the idea with something akin to religious fervor.)

But Texans understood instinctively what research has demonstrated time and again: our state would survive the national economic downturn better than most precisely because of our low-tax, non-income-tax status. That reputation alone has brought businesses and jobs to Texas in droves during the last decade.

So when Gov. Perry, Lt. Gov. Dewhurst, Speaker Craddick 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: increased taxes would forfeit economic growth and destroy jobs.

When the people said "limit the growth of government," they had a leadership that sympathized. When the people said "make government more efficient," they had a legislature willing to act. And when the people said "hold the line on taxes," they were taken seriously and presented a budget that did it.

But cries of doom are echoing across the Texas prairie as newspapers and the left's political pundits have denounced the gloomy days of smaller government... and are still making the pitch for income taxes and the like.

What accounts for the discontent between the implementation of the will of two-thirds of the people, and this call for more spending and new taxes? Hasn't the legislature proven the budget can be balanced without them?

It's not a question of balanced budgets. Nor is it "they" want to be taxed more and "we" less. The problem is nothing more complicated than vastly different views of the role government should play in our lives. We all see the same problems: unemployment, uninsured children and lagging medical care. But we have different solutions.

In the political minority are those who trust government bureaucracies and public agencies more than individuals and private institutions. Government, they believe, can cure social ills.

Need a job? Check with government. Sick? Get on a program. Need help? Pass a law. Government spending, in this view, is the measure of a society's compassion. You and I simply cannot be trusted to act morally with our money.

Conversely, two-thirds of Texans last November used their vote to demand that taxpayer "help" be truly helpful and go only to those who really need it, for only as long as necessary.

The majority of Texans know compassion is not measured by how much tax money is spent on questionable programs, or the number of people receiving welfare. Rather, it is found in how many people are liberated from the chains of dependence.

Economic and political freedom, the majority evidently believes, have a way of solving a great

many problems – social and otherwise. A growing economy, not a growing government, brings general prosperity.

So while the ideological divide may be wider than the distance from Beaumont to El Paso, with rhetoric hotter than August, the vast majority of Texans stand resolutely on one side.

As a people, we voted overwhelmingly for a new vision in state government, and our leaders have begun to implement it. Let the naysayers howl. Let the people rejoice. And watch all Texans prosper.

*Michael Quinn Sullivan is Vice President of the
Texas Public Policy Foundation.*