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Bring back Dicky Flatt

By MARY KATHERINE STOUT
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When U.S. Sen. Phil Gramm introduced the "Dicky Flatt test" to his colleagues and to the country, he brought a new conscience to budget writing and created an iconic image for fiscal discipline.

It was Dicky Flatt, the printer from Mexia with seemingly permanent blue ink stains on his fingers, who became Gramm's standard by which to judge every plea for a government appropriation.

The test was easy: Is an item of spending worth taking a dollar from Dicky Flatt's ink-stained hands? Gramm knew that Washington's generosity was truly paid for by hard-working taxpayers like Dicky Flatt.

It is a test that lawmakers nationwide might do well to use today, including those now gathered in Austin.

Today, Texas stares at \$14.3 billion in new revenue above the previous budget, and the debate about what to do with it will take center stage. Of lesser profile will be debates on individual items of spending and even matters of policy. But in any case, considering the cost of taking the money from taxpayers' pockets is important.

This isn't merely an exercise in low taxes and low spending. It is about creating opportunities for people to take care of their own families, giving second thought to government's naked redistribution of money and the hardship it places on taxpayers to turn over hard-earned cash with little real say in how it is spent.

Although the state budget is rife with examples, the discussions on eligibility and services among the state's social services programs come to mind first.

The Children's Health Insurance Program has been a particular target for advocates of expanding government services through liberalizing eligibility requirements and making it easier to enroll in government aid.

They portray the CHIP assets test as draconian, and they remained undeterred even after the state learned that some applicants and recipients were driving current-year luxury cars, and others had substantial cash in savings -- all while enjoying CHIP benefits paid for by taxpayers.

They fight to lengthen the period of continuous eligibility for these services from six months to 12, though they recognize that some recipients become ineligible during the course of a year.

They fight cost-sharing in the program, pleading that recipients are too poor to pay anything for their care, even those making as much as \$40,000 annually for a family of four.

They presume that every applicant or recipient is equally needy and absolve them of any responsibility, while efforts to protect taxpayers are portrayed as greed.

Perhaps some see this as noble when the images of the poor and the wealthy stand in sharp contrast: the poor single mother with two children versus the wealthy businessman and his family.

But what happens when the distinctions are less clear?

What about the single mother with one child, struggling to make ends meet but making just more than enough to qualify the two of them for government assistance? They subsidize the single mother with two children making slightly less, though their situation is only marginally better.

What about a middle-income family trying to provide health insurance for themselves while generously subsidizing those who pay little or nothing for their care?

The reality is that government attempts to help some people will harm others. At the very least, government owes it to the taxpayers to ensure that those receiving government assistance are truly needy.

No doubt some will argue that government should do more, mistakenly believing that government has the ability to care for people and the limitless resources to do it. But in reality, the only way that the government has the resources to pay for these programs is by confiscating the money through taxing its people. And taxing people necessarily means stripping people of their resources to meet their needs, while lawmakers redirect their money to others.

It's easy to hand out the money when lawmakers see only the faces of people with outstretched hands, be they compelling faces of children or friendly faces of those making a business on profiting from taxpayer money. Indeed, taxpayers need a face that reminds lawmakers where this money comes from -- that or Dicky Flatt's blue fingers.

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