

Growth's Limit No Threat to Government

Minneapolis Star-Tribune, April 7, 2004
Op-ed, page A15, Metro edition

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If you listen to some critics of the proposed Taxpayer's Bill of Rights, you may think that the measure would mean the end of democratic government. "We might as well close the legislative branch," wrote one reader of the Star-Tribune. TABOR, as it is commonly known, says that governments should not, absent a vote of the people, grow any faster than what population growth and inflation require. That's got some people worried, needlessly.

From the League of Minnesota Cities, Jim Miller has said that advocates of TABOR hold the false belief that "good government can be had with minimal effort." Jeff Thompson of the Minnesota Mayors Association suggests that a better alternative is to attend city council meetings and watch local access government channels.

The message of these critics: Having good government is a complicated business requiring thoughtful deliberation. TABOR is a simple-minded proposal. It's bad. Trust us, we're office-holders.

But there is no contradiction between pursuing good government and having institutional restraints such as TABOR.

In fact, the two go hand in hand. This country's founders created the original Bill of Rights knowing that institutional restraints are essential for good government. Today, we all enjoy some measure of good government "with minimal effort" because the original Bill of Rights protects us.

The balanced budget requirements and line-item veto that most states use are two other institutional restraints. These, too, allow the public to have good government with minimal effort. Thanks to them, the governor can eliminate egregious cases of waste, and the state cannot run debts for operating expenses. Other restraints already apply at the local level as well. TABOR simply continues in the tradition of using institutional restraints to promote good government.

Another argument raised against TABOR is that it is government-by-autopilot, a dangerous restraint on the future. As the Star-Tribune wrote in an editorial, we should not "limit future options" available to policy makers and the public.

Never mind the fact that officials will always have plenty of options, simply because they must decide how to allocate tax revenue and government spending. Under TABOR, they will also have the option of asking the voters for permission to raise taxes. It happens all

the time in Colorado, home of the original statewide Taxpayers Bill of Rights. Local governments that clearly explain what they plan to do with new money win voter approval for tax increases roughly half of the time.

Is this an unreasonable restraint on government authority?

Miller seems to think so, saying “plebiscites become increasingly impractical in our changing world.” Impractical? Only for those who think that the making of important decisions should be restricted to those willing to spend countless hours wrapped up in the political process.

As our experience with the original Bill of Rights and other forms of checks and balances have shown, representative government, public leadership, and institutional restraints are not in conflict. They work together. A Taxpayer’s Bill of Rights designed for Minnesota continues in our state’s ethic of good government.

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