

Editorial: The Sound of Silence

February, 2003

Here's a riddle. What speaks with the loudest, most powerful voice in the land, but has never spoken a single word? Answer: the silent majority.

The silent majority's voice was heard on Jan. 28th as it rose to defeat Measure 28—the income tax increase. There's a simple reason that this growing majority in Oregon is silent. Its voice is muzzled by other forces—among them the statewide media and the public employee unions.

Newspapers and television news programs across Oregon have been willing, or at best easily manipulated, accomplices to the public unions that now threaten the well-being of Oregon. From the outset, as unions waged their cynical campaign to convince voters that more taxes were the only answer to our budget crisis, the media joined in with little regard for depth or proportion.

Stories of the draconian cuts that would fall on the most vulnerable aired nightly. Stories of desperate seniors, weary teachers, sad children—you name it. When that wasn't enough, news stories warned of massive prisoner releases and cuts to police forces. It was a great public relations job by the multitudinous agencies of public employees. On election night some TV newscasters, unable to restrain their personal feelings, appeared visibly upset about the Measure's defeat.

But still the silent majority said NO. No—by a margin of 55-45. No—they don't believe these are the only options. No—they don't believe more taxes are the solution. No—live within the budget, just like the rest of us. No—a responsible governor would never have allowed all the cuts from the entire biennium, with a predicted shortfall, to land squarely on the final five months of the final year.

Unless it was planned that way for effect. If all the cuts could be forced to fall together in five months on the most glaring, pitiful, and frightening budget areas, then the silent majority would have to cave. Wouldn't they?

No—they were not fooled. Now that it's over are they worried? Yes. Losing confidence in government, oh yes. And angry, definitely. Very angry. So angry that it is likely we may be hearing more of the sound of silence.

For even after losing the election decisively the public employee unions appear to be retrenching for all-out war. Rather than immediately retooling the phoned-up cuts to prevent real damage to real Oregonians, these unions have dug into a bitter “we told you so” position. By all appearances, their goal appears to be to inflict pain and retribution on the voters—the silent majority—for daring to deny them their outrageous, continuous growth.

And yes, growth is still the watchword for Oregon government. State School Superintendent Susan Castillo's new budget, for example, is \$60 million more than the prior budget.

Word of caution to Rep. Kurt Schrader, D-Canby. House Speaker Karen Minnis is rightfully restoring funding to the most critical areas damaged by Measure 28 tactics. Her plan is being fast-tracked through the Republican-held house to prevent the brutal cuts that your fellow Democrats, Rep. Schrader, seem hell-bent on inflicting. Your peers have pushed you to the front man position on this immoral, absurd game of "we told you so" partisan politics. And Gov. Kulongoski has already made his first serious political mistake by not taking the high leadership ground himself to restore these cuts. Continue to carry this flag, Rep. Schrader, and your promising career could be badly tainted. You will become the unions' waterboy, a tool of pain and divisiveness. Step away from this wrong fight.

Look-it's simple. Business creates wealth, which generates taxes, that pays for government. When business is in recession (or is forced into it by overly zealous government), then taxes decline. In economic recession, it is not a solution to try to levy more taxes—even if the goal is to increase tax volume. It is income that must be stimulated.

The critical discussions in Oregon right now are almost entirely centered on the wrong topic. Or rather the discussion has been hijacked, as usual by the same old culprits—the media and the public employee unions. The discussion should be about generating more business to create more wealth and therefore more taxes. Instead it is about squeezing more dollars out of struggling businesses and ordinary families.

No better example exists than in Multnomah County and Portland where heavily union-financed politicians, such as Lisa Naito, Eric Sten, Randy Leonard, and Maria Rojo de Steffey have proposed new payroll taxes and additional income taxes as the solution to declining business revenues and taxes. These short-term "solutions" fly in the face of economic good sense, and though they may temporarily appease locals whipped into a frenzy about the failure of their schools and their city services—they solve nothing. They are nothing but political posturing.

With apologies to those who did not participate, there is a bittersweet irony about Multnomah County and Portland businesses being taxed yet again, since they were the collaborators who supported Measure 28 and helped finance the election of our heavily union-backed new governor. You get what you pay for.

But the silent majority will have none of it. None of the economic nonsense. None of the proposed new taxes. It isn't even clear that an income tax increase will pass in the heart of darkness, downtown Portland. The sound of silence echoes even there.

The silent majority is angry. Angry that their decisive vote on Measure 28 is being used as a weapon to hurt vulnerable citizens by partisan politicians who will stop at nothing to appease their campaign benefactors—the unions. The silent majority understands that there is a deeper decision facing Oregon than any single tax measure.

The deeper, more sinister fight that brews in Salem, indeed across Oregon, is whether public employees work for Oregonians, or Oregonians work for public employees. It is clear that public employees in this state think that Oregonians live, work and breathe to provide revenue for them. What else could possibly explain the audacity of a teachers union that has forced cuts in every segment of public education by selfishly demanding unaffordable increases in their own salaries and benefits? A union that now threatens to strike for even higher wages and benefits, that takes its daily whine to the daily paper about how hard they all work, yet is blind to the unemployment, the failing businesses, the layoffs, the poverty all around them? In their hearts they mistakenly believe that Oregonians work for them, not they for us. They demand immunity from the realities of life.

Consider the mindset behind these decisions: Recent reports told of lottery dollars being spent on expensive consultants and first class fares for agency employees. No more first class, said the newly appointed director. Oregon Tax Research reports that taxpayers are paying an extra \$3 million per day as long as the Public Employees Retirement System (PERS) goes unreformed. Oregon schools have cut a record number of academic schooldays from their year as well as possibly cutting sports and arts programs, though in-service days remain for teachers. CIM-CAM is perhaps the most widely disparaged “reform” program in state history, yet millions are spent and precious days and days of school time are wasted on it.

The seething sound of silence, if you tiptoe out of Multnomah County that is, breathes this message from the majority to Salem. No more travel, period, until budgets are balanced. Not even coach class. No more consultants, even cheap consultants. No more bloated pensions. No more in-service days, no training days, no special assemblies, no special programs. Nothing comes before academic school days—nothing. Not teachers, not administrators, and no, not even sports (with their three complete sets of personalized uniforms). Cut anything, everything, before you cut real class time.

Portland teachers themselves are now drawing battle lines internally as their union has directed teachers to “work to the rule”—to walk out on their students on the dot of 3:15, for example. Even teachers are asking themselves—who works for whom?

Not even union contracts should come before the education of our children.

Gov. Kulongoski, step into this fundamental fight, draw the line, and lead. You were elected in a close decision, not because of, but rather in spite of, your public employee union ties. Do they work for us, or do we work for them?

Don't let this question linger. The wrong answer leads to years of economic hardship for Oregon. And remember the majority, the silent majority, already told you the answer. Listen to the sound of silence.