

Attempt to Recall The Rebel Assessor

USE OF THE RECALL seems to be a current fad in California politics. A committee representing citizens dissatisfied with Governor Ronald Reagan recently fell short of collecting the 780,000 signatures required to force a recall election. Two separate committees worked for the recall of Irene Hickman. The first, starting in the summer of 1967, was organized by one of her disgruntled employees. It was not particularly well financed or well organized and failed to collect enough signatures. A second group called the "Citizens Committee for Assessor Recall", organized in October 1967, was better directed and financed. Its board of directors contained important Sacramento names—some with political backgrounds, some wealthy land owners, some just "interested citizens". One gets the impression that it was more than a fortuitous accident that brought these names together. Very likely, a county official over lunch with a bank president or a newspaper editor decided that "Something's got to be done about Irene Hickman—let's get a committee together . . ." And possibly with the help of a doctor, a store owner, and a lawyer, they got together a list of people to approach—solid citizens whose names would look good on the recall committee. Whether this impression of behind the scenes control is accurate or not, the second committee was effective. They set up petition stations in shopping centres, circulated them door to door, and paid petition carriers, and by early spring had obtained over 35,000 signatures—enough to force a recall election. The business meetings of this recall committee were occasionally enlivened by Dr. Hickman's attempts to attend. After one of her unsuccessful efforts to gain entrance, Irene remarked, "Ha, look at them. The Cadillac crowd! They're considered the cream of Sacramento leadership. Sour cream! None of

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them are here for anything but his own self interest." When several candidates were proposed, Dr. Hickman put up Mickey Mouse, distributing campaign cards sponsored by the "Committee for Mickey Mouse Politics". Later she announced that her husband Jack would run for assessor if she was recalled—but nothing came of it.

With the recall election assured, three candidates filed petitions for the ballot. One candidate, Wallace Engel, had been a chief appraiser in the assessor's office until Dr. Hickman arrived. Dr. Hickman demoted Engel and took over his job herself. When he announced his candidacy against her, a stormy session occurred between the two of them and he was "granted" a leave of absence until after the recall election. A second candidate and former city councilman, John Shelby, was manager of a large land investment and development firm, and represented the type of interests that had been Dr. Hickman's primary target. The third candidate, Vincent Asta, was a private appraiser. Dr. Hickman's next move was to attempt to run herself as a write-in candidate. A recall ballot has two parts. The first part asks the voter to mark "yes" or "no" if the office holder should be recalled. The second part asks the voter to vote for the candidate of his choice to take office if the office holder is recalled. The voter may vote on the second part regardless

to keep her, 30,001 might vote to recall. Result—she's recalled. Thus, she might get 30,000 votes and lose, and yet one of her opponents might get 20,000 votes (two-thirds of those against her) and win. It didn't seem right somehow, so she decided she should run as a write-in. She might not be liked by most but still be better liked than any other candidate. The idea of Dr. Hickman running as a write-in didn't seem legal to the Assistant County Counsel and he disallowed it—her \$440 filing fee was returned.

About this time it was announced that because of many duplicate signatures, Asta did not have enough valid signatures, and his name would not appear on the ballot. "Aha!" thought Dr. Hickman, and she immediately began to check the 35,000 signatures on the recall petitions filed several months earlier. Residents of Sacramento were then witnesses to an intriguing battle. In one corner of the county clerk's office sat Irene Hickman subtracting invalid signatures from the recall petitions. In another corner, also putting in eight to ten hour-days, sat a member of the recall committee trying to find additional valid signatures. As the election neared Dr. Hickman reported that after going through about half the petitions she had found in excess of 2,000 invalid signatures—duplicates and forgeries (she called in a handwriting expert). She asked for the election to be delayed. She was turned down successively by the County Board of Supervisors, the Superior Court, and the District Court of Appeals. The courts felt that since much money had already been spent preparing for the election, it should be held as scheduled, and claims of fraud could be filed after the election took place.

Election day came and, as practically no one but Dr. Hickman's "Committee" had predicted, she gained a decisive victory. Nearly 60 per cent of the voters opposed the recall. In fact, she



of whether he voted "yes" or "no" on the first part but he must vote on the first part. Dr. Hickman reasoned that something like this might happen: 30,000 might vote

attained a greater percentage of the vote than she had when first elected.

In 1957 Sacramento County began a program to modernize



equipment and procedures, introducing a new mapping system, retraining employees, and embarking on a complete reappraisal of the county's 200,000 plus properties — some with assessments that were twenty-six years old. All this in a state where postwar land values have grown faster than any state in the Union.

Whereas different ratios had been used for different types of properties, by 1964 all property was formally being assessed at the same ratio. In ten years the necessary improvements in appraising raised cost per appraisal from 25 cents to \$15. According to members of her staff Dr. Hickman has made no major changes in appraisal practices. She has increased the number of supervisory positions, improving the opportunities for advancement within the office, and has seen to it that her appraisers received additional training in appraising land as opposed to improvements. In order to keep assessments current in areas of greater price mobility, she asked that the assessor's office receive notification of all sales. Properties in active areas will thus be appraised more frequently than those in more stable neighbourhoods.

The action in Sacramento County would appear to be a portent of the coming national battle for tax reform. The real issue is not the establishment of a uniform ratio (be it 25 per cent or 100 per cent). It may not even be the consistent application of assessing at "full cash value" since the determination of that figure includes many subjective factors. Two identical department stores on opposite corners in the central business district could differ significantly in

potential sales price or the ratio of income to investment if the quality of management was markedly different in the two stores. To give one a lower assessment than the other is to underwrite poor management. The issue, then, seems to be an equitable distribution of taxes among different classes of property (residential, commercial, industrial, and speculative), independent of individual differences in the number and kinds of improvements (swimming pools, patios, extra bedrooms), or the quality of management.

So many changes have occurred in the United States in the past 50 years that dependence on a "traditional" tax structure may not only be inequitable, it may be absurd—if any one understands it well enough to judge. The concentration of over two-thirds of our population on seven per cent of the land, the decreased importance of farming in our economy, and the increased importance of "people services" (education, welfare, police, and recreation) in the city budgets as opposed to housekeeping functions (water, sanitation, fire, transportation)—all suggest a radical rearrangement of needs, priorities and responsibilities in the collection and disbursement of public funds. Surprising as it may be to most of us, property taxes have declined as a source of municipal funds. This is partly due to greater federal support of local programs. It may also be due to failure of local tax rolls to reflect adequately the growth in land and property values. Since federal funds come largely from the taxes on corporate and individual income, the declining importance of the property tax could be interpreted—in Henry George's terminology—as a shift from taxing land to taxing labor. This decline could also be partially attributed to the fixed amount of land as opposed to the increased productivity of an expanding and technologically sophisticated society.

Irene Hickman and Henry George object to taxing a man's labour. In this they are ideologically bedded down with those extreme conservatives who favour abolishing the income tax. The value of land, they

argue, is created by the interaction of men, by foot traffic. A central location in a large city is valuable precisely because many people pass by. Since our collective presence creates the value, our collective representative—government—should collect part of the reward. In this they fall more on the ideological left. It seems somehow appropriate that a woman and a philosophy embracing the extremes in our national political life should sprout and flower in the fertile soil of California's political hothouse. How whimsical it would be if Dr. Hickman and her "19th century hippie" mentor provide us with a partial solution to the equitable distribution of social costs—by taxing land based on 'where it's at' rather than 'what's on it'.

At any rate, even her critics agree that Dr. Hickman is an honest woman, doing to the best of her ability (which is considerable) what she sincerely believes in. And that, after all, merely reflects her philosophy of living: "If a man has wisdom and does not share it with his fellows; or if he has great wealth and keeps it all unto himself, he is very likely to be reborn a woman."

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MOST HOPEFUL IDEA

I THINK the most hopeful idea in the department of economics is this: That it is possible for a man to make a lot of money without taking advantage of anyone else.

This means that one man may get richer without making others poorer.

National prosperity is the inevitable companion of individual's prosperity, provided only that the individual's prosperity is founded on production. From *The William Feather Magazine*, January, 1970.