

# California Commentary

## And the Villain Is — Proposition 13, Of Course!

By Jon Coupal

The big moribund downtown Los Angeles newspaper is after Proposition 13 again. Appropriately ensconced in a mausoleum-like building, the *Los Angeles Times* (“*Times*”) has become synonymous with a left wing editorial policy and managed or tainted news.

The paper has besmirched its own reputation with policies that allowed a secret revenue sharing agreement between the *Times* and the Staples Center in the preparation of a 168 page magazine about the opening of the sports arena in 1999. When this story became public, it angered readers and most *Times* reporters alike.

And then there was the page one “grope-gate” story about Arnold Schwarzenegger’s alleged frat boy approach to women that appeared four days before the 2003 special election in which he was a candidate. Seems the paper had been working on the story for six months but could find no other time to publish it.

Reader backlash has helped grease a revolving door for *Times* editors, but this has not saved circulation. Readership was down 6.7% for 2005 and has declined another 5.4% this year.

Remaining a constant, however, is the off-center bias in editorial writing and hostility to Proposition 13.

Writing about the campaign to pass Proposition 13, Howard Jarvis, the measure’s principal

author, observed: “Some of the publications in California were so ignorant about taxes, politics, and the law that they should have been banned from writing about 13 — if for no other reason than to protect themselves from being laughed at.” The *Times*, which Jarvis also called, “the enemy of the people,” never got the message.

Recently, the paper published an editorial in which it took Proposition 13 to task for the growth in fees, charges, and taxes *unrelated* to property and the creation of a “budget knot.”

Holding Proposition 13 responsible for the imposition of new taxes and charges makes as much sense as saying crowing roosters are the cause of morning sunshine.

Proposition 13 was a response to insensitive government officials who were allowing escalating property taxes to force Californians from their homes. The intent of Howard Jarvis was to make taxes on property more reasonable and predictable. Judged on that score, Proposition 13 has been an overwhelming success. What Proposition 13 did not do is make politicians smarter, wiser, or sensitive to the concerns of taxpayers.

It is doubtful the *Times* wants to “revisit” the landmark measure out of concern over the increase in taxes that have been imposed in spite of Proposition 13. Much more likely is that the editors want to change Proposition 13 to *increase revenues* to the ever hungry public bu-

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reaucracy. Certainly that would unravel their perceived “budget knot.”

Unable to leave well enough alone, several days ago, the *Times* published an opinion piece entitled, “Prop. 13 Is Stealing From Our Children” under the byline of Karin Klein, one of its editorial writers. We are told that patriotism is the last refuge of scoundrels. Well, when it comes to tax policy, hiding behind children is a close second.

Klein, it seems, is peeved that as a mother of school-age children, she has been encouraged to shell out several hundred dollars in donations, including “booster fees” for cross-country and track. The writer objects to feeling pressed to contribute for extras for her children that schools, prior to Proposition 13, provided at no additional cost.

No additional cost to *whom*? Ask the thousands of Californians who, before Proposition 13, picked up the bill for everything schools and governments provided, and who were in danger of *losing their homes* as a result of astronomical increases in property taxes. Klein should know that nothing is ever free, that someone somewhere must pay for what she receives from any public agency.

However, Klein, who resides in Laguna Beach, knows just who should pay. Some of her neighbors have been living in their homes for 40 years and are paying lower property taxes than more recent buyers. According to her, “equitable taxation” — raising taxes on longtime property owners — would “solve” the problem by providing an enriched and equal education for all kids.

Klein’s “solution” is flawed in a number of ways.

First, she totally ignores the fact that Californians now generously provide, after adjusting

for inflation, 30% *more* dollars per pupil than they did *prior* to Proposition 13, and that it is very likely that this additional money could be spent to better effect.

Second, she assumes that her neighbors in million dollar-plus homes could afford to buy them at *today’s* prices and therefore pay higher taxes. Chances are that most of these homes were purchased for much less than \$100,000 forty years ago, and increasing taxes based on current value could force the aging owners into the streets.

And at no point does Klein quantify just how much should reasonably be spent on an “enriched” curriculum, which certainly should be the subject of public debate, but not used as a justification for an open-ended tax increase.

Howard Jarvis would be chuckling over this *Times* editorial writer’s tax policy naiveté, but he wouldn’t be surprised.

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