

Democrats give 'change' a bad name

After a 1992 election in which the people voted for "change," big things were expected from the 1993 Legislature.

So-called "New Democrats" like Gov. Mike Lowry and the solid Democrat majorities in the state House and Senate were going to bring an end to "gridlock" and give Washington's citizens universal health care, streamlined state government, and education reform.

But what we got from these "new Democrats" are the same old things: record new taxes, record spending, continued growth in state government and experiments in health care and education.

Surely this is not the change voters demanded last fall. The 1993 legislative session — a solid one-party (Democrat) majority in the Legislature and a liberal Democratic governor have given change a bad name.

Let's take a look at health care reform, for example. When you think of reform, you assume it will be done in such a way as to make things better. But that's not necessarily going to be the case with health care reform.

If you are among the 11 percent of the state's general population without health insurance, that will change for you by 1998. Whether you want insurance or not, you'll be required to have coverage. And depending on your income, you'll be paying for it. How much? That's up to the five bureaucrats yet to be appointed by the governor who'll form the state Health Services Commission.

If you're an employer, you'll be required to provide health insurance for your employees and pay at least half of the premium. How much? That's up to those bureaucrats, but estimates range from about \$60 per month to \$160 per month, if you pay only half the premium. The employer pays the rest. You must cover all your employees — even part-time workers must be covered on a pro rata basis.

And if you are an employee of a small or medium-sized company who currently enjoys health care benefits for yourself and your family, chances are you're going to pay more and get less. What will be covered? You guessed right — that's up to the commission. And there is no guarantee you'll get to keep the doctor you have today — that depends on whether your employer offers a health plan your doctor belongs to.

If all of this sounds expensive and bureaucratic, that's because it is. Over a billion dollars will be raised by the new taxes on health care, to-



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Special to the Union-Bulletin

bacco and liquor over the next few years. But budget experts on the Senate Ways and Means Committee estimate that's only half what it will cost to implement this plan and provide coverage for unemployed families.

It will get even more expensive with time, because there are no cost controls — just arbitrary price caps on premiums. That's a little like putting tight clothes on a child and saying the child won't grow any more because there's no room in the clothes.

What the Legislature could and should have done instead of dismantling the highest-quality system of medical care in the world is to attack the real problems of our health care industry: providing access for the uninsured and addressing the other facts that increase costs — like medical malpractice insurance premiums which have skyrocketed because of huge lawsuit damage awards.

The Legislature ignored that opportunity. But lawmakers also left behind other opportunities for real change.

The state's most recent revenue projections told legislators they would have been \$900 million more to spend over the next two years than has been available in the current budget. But increases in prison population, school enrollments and welfare caseloads meant that without spending cuts, the state would need a billion dollars on top of that to balance the budget.

Gov. Lowry and the "New Democrats" responded the old-fashioned way. Gov. Lowry proposed over \$1.5 billion in new state taxes and fees, plus another \$1.1 billion in new taxes on gasoline. On top of that, he endorsed a plan to raise health care taxes by \$250 million, and announced he might seek a state income tax next year.

The Legislature finally settled on \$1.2 billion in new taxes, additional fees, higher college tuition and other cost increases, including a \$670 million package of business and sales tax increases. So much for "soaking the rich." The fact is, we'll all be paying these higher taxes and fees, either directly, or in the form of higher costs charged to us by busi-

nesses.

The "New Democrats" told us we need these new taxes, to "invest" in basic education, human services and higher education. They had cut all they could, they said. But what they cut were programs that people depend on — like schools, natural resources and human services. They broke their promise to "scrub" the budget and clean out waste.

Here's what they could have done:

- 1. Reduce Employment costs (Savings: \$454 million)... Freeze hiring and salaries, ask state employees to help pay for their health benefits, reduce overtime, pay employees once per month, don't "buy back" unused sick leave.

- 2. Reduce "Support Costs" (Savings: \$280 million)... Cut spending on Goods and Services, furnishings and equipment, travel by public employees, retreats and conferences.

- 3. Make Administration More Efficient (Savings: \$45 million)... Charge overhead to dedicated funds, exempt state vehicles from state gas tax, increase child support collections.

- 4. Privatize (Savings: \$65 million)... Allow private companies to provide twelve administrative and maintenance functions in state government.

- 5. Reform Welfare (Savings: \$40 million)... Revise welfare allowances for employable adults in one of the state's welfare programs.

Only about \$45 million of these cost-saving suggestions were incorporated into the state budget. So while we're all paying higher taxes, some privileged public employees will continue receiving 5 percent pay raises, travelling across the country at state expense, having the state "buy back" portions of their unused sick leave and purchasing new furnishings and equipment for new offices in Olympia.

A recent Wall Street Journal editorial sympathized with our state's taxpayers, noting that not long ago, Washington state was the "toast of the nation for its vibrant economy," before Gov. Lowry and the "New Democrats" began looking in virtually every corner for new taxes.

Washington citizens "took a fling" with Lowry, the Journal said, and now we have a collective hangover. I only hope the people of Washington can find a way to survive this "binge" in Olympia until the real cure can be found at the voting booth.

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