

# Snatching Victory From the Jaws of Defeat

It came as no surprise to most that the tax referendum proffered by Republican Gov. Bob Riley failed so miserably—including me, although I supported it. In the end, however, there is a possibility that we may end up victors in this lopsided defeat.

Let's face it. Paying taxes is an unpopular fact of life. Most people resent paying taxes, even for basic needs.

Without question, however, money to meet current governmental obligations is lacking and there is a crisis. Yet, as some of the more vocal opponents to the referendum pointed out, taxpayers are providing millions and millions of dollars for current services. As one opponent asked, "How much is enough?"

For Alabama, with a record of being last in the nation, or close to it, in providing services to its citizens—especially education—the evidence is overwhelming. The current amount of revenue being produced from taxes is insufficient to keep the state competitive with the region.

As a former school board member, I know how devastating a proration can be to our education system, especially when almost 80 percent of all funds go for salaries. This always means the loss of teachers in an already deficient system with overcrowded classrooms, and it is demoralizing to teachers and school officials. Unfortunately, prorations have become a norm rather than the exception in Alabama.

Money, or the lack of it, was not really the issue with the tax referendum, according to the victors. It was other issues, such as stewardship and accountability.

Morality became an issue early on and continued to the bitter end. While Scripture leaves little need to debate the conduct of believers in matters of faith and finances, evidence from financial statements indicates that both God and Caesar, at least in Alabama, come up short of the demanded loyalty in money matters. For people of faith, particularly Christians, the minimum is 10 percent of what we possess. Is that before or after taxes?

But are such issues what really weighted the scale against the tax referendum? The answer is two-fold: no and yes.

The answer was no for the leadership and many Republican Party loyalists who tabbed Gov. Riley a traitor—one of the nicer terms given him. For many, what the GOP stands for took precedent over what the GOP governor sought, and for others it was a personal matter.

The answer was yes for other loyal Republicans who felt the needs in Alabama on this issue were greater than their loyalty to a political party, or that the measure was fair, equitable and the tax restructure needed.

The answer was no for some Democrats who distrust whatever the opposition presents. Yet, by the size of the loss, many opposed it for reasons other than political.

For a sizeable number of Democrats, the answer was yes. Here again, these voters apparently felt that the needs of the state outweighed the need to defeat the program of a political opponent.

The answer was no for an obviously large segment of the faith community, including the leadership of the state chapter of the Christian Coalition. For them, the issue was more political than religious. It was a state issue, not a church issue.

The answer was yes for a sizeable segment of the religious community who apparently felt it as much a moral issue—"the right thing to do," as a political one.

Even the national Christian Coalition leadership supported it against the wishes of the state chapter.

In the aftermath of the results, according to pollsters, distrust of leadership—both political and organizational—was the major concern in defeating the tax referendum. Both pollsters and leaders of the opposition say this distrust developed from a perceived lack of accountability and stewardship of current funds. Even the governor acknowledged such as factors in the loss.

Regardless of the reasons, one thing is certain: the tax structure is unfair, immoral and needs to be corrected. It is this obsolete and immoral tax structure that is as much the cause of the current financial crisis in the state as accountability and stewardship of the legislature.

Yet, many who opposed the referendum on basis of distrust of leadership claim they support a fairer distribution of taxes. If these opponents keep that promise and the tax structure is reformed, it will be a victory.

Likewise, if the defeat of the governor's initiative results in more accountability and stewardship of the Legislature, and ultimately to a more efficient government, then victory will have been snatched from the jaws of defeat as all of these issues were at the heart of the governor's plan.

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