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Hancock II a perversion of activist's tool for reform



I believe the referendum, in the hands of a conscious public, is one of the most effective tools for changing or "taking back" government for the common good.

Especially in the United States, where special interests and entrenched politicians have been able to subvert the process of designing federal legislation to the point that, as Molly Ivans has said, we have a government, "by the moneyed special interests and for the moneyed special interests."

Amendment 7, however, is a twisted use of the power of referendum. Commonly known as Hancock II, it will appear on the Nov. 8 ballot and would significantly affect state budgeting. How drastic its affect on conservation and environmental quality remains unknown, mostly because the proposal's wording is unclear. David Shorr, director of the Missouri Department of Natural Resources, has said that approval of the amendment means, at minimum, the elimination of the state's safe drinking water program.

The proposal's namesake, U.S. Rep. Mel Hancock, began campaigning for Amendment 7 after passage of Senate Bill 380, the Outstanding Schools Act of 1992. This law — in order to restructure school funding to comply with a state court order — imposed a progressive income tax on corporations and raised personal income taxes for the richest 16 percent of Missourians. The idea was to try to bring underfunded schools up to match the resources of other schools. The only alternative was to let education suffer.

Amendment 7 would amend the Missouri Constitution so that all increases in state revenue would have to be approved by voters. Not only would the amendment limit future tax increases, it would retroactively affect many tax increases since 1980 — which is why estimates of state budget cuts range from \$1 billion to \$5 billion. The total state budget for fiscal 1995 is \$12 billion.

Support for Amendment 7 began

with industry and business hoping for tax relief — initial donations for the campaign included large sums from asphalt and pipeline companies. From then on, many people were duped into signing petitions without understanding the ramifications of the amendment. When gathering signatures to put the referendum on the ballot, many petitioners claimed that it would "stop all those bureaucrats from making big salaries, like Kiesler and Russell." The amendment does no such thing.

Ignorance about Amendment 7's content goes beyond the petitioners. Mel Hancock, in a Springfield debate, admitted that he was unsure of the amendment's potential impact. He also suggested the budget could be reduced in any area, and might not affect education or human services.

In reality, cuts could not be made "across the board," since about three-fourths of the state budget is exempt — that is, spending required by federal and state laws. The other fourth — including monies for education, corrections, social services, highways and public health — would therefore take the cuts.

Tribune publisher Hank Waters called opponents of Amendment 7 "chicken littles" this week for their apparent panic at possible approval of the amendment. "Hancock II is a tool for allowing more public leverage," he said.

Amendment 7 is not about increasing public leverage. It's about political leverage and money. This referendum is down right irresponsible. I am personally disgusted at this perversion of one of our most powerful democratic tools.

Now is the definitely the time to push for radical reform of government — Hancock II isn't the reform we need.

If you have a suggestion for a column, a gripe, a success story or whatever, write it down and send it to me, care of the Columbia Daily Tribune, PO Box 798, Columbia, Mo., 65205.