

## Chapter 25

### QUESTIONS ABOUT OUR FUTURE

“The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.” – Edmund Burke

It is imperative that we deal with our political future on several fronts. We need to ask some important questions. How are we going to address bringing local government to the unincorporated county territories as the Santa Clarita Valley builds out? What are we going to do to deal with the popular disenchantment with government? What can we do to deal with some of the near-term problems while attempting to solve the bigger ones?

First, our local government challenges are particularly vexing. We are not addressing the growing problem of the political future of the Santa Clarita Valley. The stakeholders, including the city and county governments, and private property owners, developers and businesses must engage in a dialogue about the future of self-government. Can we expect to have one city, or shall we plan for several? The development of our economy, with the concentration of major retail and automobile dealerships in the City of Santa Clarita, may preclude the incorporation of local governments in Castaic and Stevenson Ranch, and even Newhall Ranch. City revenues are based on population and sales tax. Whether a major industrial center is in one city or another is not important, for Proposition 13 froze property tax distribution. Under the present system Santa Clarita has no property tax revenue, nor will any other new city. Can we arrive at a plan which will give all parties confidence that their concerns will be addressed fairly and equitably?

Tragically, the leadership of Castaic and Stevenson Ranch has shown little interest in looking at the facts. The people of these areas seem to be content with inaction, with remaining a part of a “local government,” the County of Los Angeles, with its population of about 10,000,000.

Second, the population of the county is a significant factor in poor government. Each supervisorial district has a population of 2,000,000, largely overseen by one elected official and his staff. It is difficult to believe that the special interests do not choose our supervisors when races are contested. In one election in recent years none of them had any opposition for reelection.

This situation is explosive. All it will take is another demagogue like Howard Jarvis to lead a disgusted people in rebellion. Remember, our “local county government” controls a population of about ten million.

The United Nations has published a list of national populations which is revealing. Of 192 countries or areas, 115 have a population of less than ten million! In short, 60% of the nations of the world have fewer people than Los Angeles County. No wonder we feel disenfranchised. No wonder that we rarely notice when there is no election for a public office because there is no opposition.

What is the good of opposing the reelection of an office holder when it takes millions of dollars to finance a winning campaign at the county level, and the special interests provide those millions? No wonder that when we do have an opportunity to vote, that we usually admit that we are voting for the “least of the evils.”

How many countries have a population of less than one Los Angeles County supervisorial district? Fifty-five. That is over twenty-eight per cent of the total.<sup>1</sup>

Third, in our efforts to make the system fair the trend is to ruin government with term limits. Oh, yes, term limits served to get Willie Brown out of the state legislature; that was the issue which rankled many. They also pushed out many good, experienced people and created a system of inexperienced legislators voting the will of a party caucus or the lobbyists who pay for their campaigns. Nobody stopped to think that term limits is a tool of the Libertarians, who simply want to do away with most of our government, including public schools and the laws against drug use and prostitution.

Before we adopted term limits we fell for the magical idea of Proposition 13. Limit property tax increases to 2% and that will reign in government! In reality, the only way to reign in government is to vote out the big spenders and work on the tax system in a positive way. Many are still paying too much in property taxes while Chris and I, who have stayed in the same home since 1976, pay relatively little. Our next-door neighbors, who moved in a few years ago, pay a huge amount, and what about the people who pay \$1000 a year in Mello-Roos assessments for a single bridge, in addition to their normal property taxes?

Fourth, no one has ever attempted to solve the problem of distributing the property taxes fairly. Essentially, each agency gets the same proportion of property tax money it used to get before Proposition 13 passed. The state makes up the difference. Thus the directors of these agencies are not answerable to the people who pay the taxes because the directors no longer set the rates. While the school boards, water boards and others do have considerable say in public policy, the watchdogs who were interested in taxes no longer keep an eye on them. Most of their meetings are attended only by employees. The public and the press have no interest.

This means there is no testing of the quality of officeholders at the school board level, where most people start their political careers. Since there is little to assess, the people are voting blind when candidates run for higher office, and many who do get elected are used to taking direction and seeking support from staffers and employees. While I have great respect for public employees, some would call that letting the inmates run the asylum.

Fifth, most governments, the bodies which take care of the street lights, sewers, county roads and the like, are special districts, the hidden governments about which we know nothing. They merit a paragraph or two in the back of the high school government text and that is it. The Northwest Los Angeles Resource Conservation District was so well hidden that they did not hold a single election for over forty years because not a single opponent ran for office in that time!

Another major problem lies with the Local Agency Formation Commission, commonly called LAFCO, which for years denied Santa Clarita a meaningful sphere of influence. Our city was told repeatedly by county officials that a sphere of influence is meaningless, while at the same time those same officials work behind closed doors to see to it that we do not get what is rightfully ours. They just smile when we ask, "If it's meaningless, why can't we have it?"

At an absolute minimum the boundaries of Santa Clarita's sphere should include, on the east and west, the territory between the eastern boundary line of the William S. Hart Union High School District and Interstate 5, and on the north and southeast the county jail facilities and national forests, while on the south the boundary should be either the City of Los Angeles or the crest of the land between the cities. The sphere would give the city some legal rights to consultations. Are these being held behind our backs at a time when everyone says we are being consulted?

We cannot expect the County of Los Angeles to adopt the position of Ventura County, which insists that developments be annexed into cities before they are processed. I am not suggesting that the supervisors take the developer point of view on this issue in return for campaign contributions. The developers simply contribute to those who have a compatible point of view. The campaign contributions give the developers access. That is, the supervisor will answer the phone when a developer calls, even if a mayor cannot get through. It is understandable. A supervisor, the sole elected official at the county level in a district of 2,000,000, gets more calls than a mayor or councilmember of a city of 165,000. For that matter, when I was mayor for the second term in 1996 my Christmas card list did not contain a hundred names. Mike Antonovich had a list of 18,000 that year.

We cannot believe that LAFCO will ever voluntarily follow what I understand to be California law and put lands close to our city, which are being developed and which we may be expected to annex, into our sphere. One solution is to sue LAFCO in federal court under the Fourteenth Amendment. Such a suit might damage severely the relations between the city and LAFCO, and also be time consuming; many important decisions on annexations would have to be made before there is any resolution. Perhaps a public interest suit is possible in federal court under the Fourteenth Amendment. I do not believe that our city is receiving equal treatment under the law.

The real solution is to get out of Los Angeles County. When taxes were going up quickly in the 1970s this was a popular cause. However, since the passage of Proposition 13 people have been lulled by the stability in their tax bills. They do not stop to think that the distribution of the money they pay is unfair because it is based on aging formulas, and that their own tax bill may be three times that of their neighbor's. Nor do they pay much attention to spending, or the declining quality of life because the state did not take proper responsibility for its spending, and for years robbed the counties, cities and special districts to pay the state's bills.

Three pieces of legislation that Los Angeles County pushed through the legislature in 1977 have halted the movement to form our own Canyon County out of a piece of Los Angeles County. However, they would not stop a well organized and well-funded county split movement. It is not likely, however, that such an effort would be successful without the support of city governments. If most of the eighty-eight cities in Los Angeles County banded together to map a county split that was equitable, it could not be stopped.

The people of Santa Clarita, through a strategic planning session or a petition drive, could make it obvious that they expect action. Could it become city policy, through approval by a referendum or initiative, to foster a county split, even if it meant spending taxpayers' funds on the campaign? Will the city council ask the city attorney about this? Is it legal for the people to turn their own city government into a special interest? People are fed up with big government. The long-term savings would outweigh the funds spent to achieve our own county government.

So much must be done, but may never be done by reasonable people because the goals are not perceived as being personally rewarding.

On November 7, 2002, the *Los Angeles Times* ran the story of Winona Ryder's legal problems as the headline in the California section, while the San Fernando Valley and Hollywood quests for self-government rated mere twenty-four point type below the fold. *It is a serious symptom of public apathy when a celebrity's travails rate more coverage than the creation of a new local government.*

The reorganization of the City of Los Angeles could have benefitted the people of the remaining area of the city as much as the areas seeking their freedom, but these people voted against letting the San Fernando Valley go by more than two to one. Of course if the people of the valley had wanted cityhood badly enough they could have had it. All they had to do was to get out the vote, for the valley vote in favor counted as part of the total vote in favor; this was critically different from the new county elections, where the majority in the "remaining county" alone could prevail. Not many people in the rest of the city voted against it, but the "Valleyistas" never started their steamroller.

Part of the problem was that the reorganization movement accepted the "secessionist" label. Undoubtedly this hurt the proponents' chances. Why would people vote for something perceived on its face as a negative? Mayor Hahn tapped the big spenders for a huge campaign war chest to broadcast the message of fear, uncertainty and doubt. The *Los Angeles Times* ran roughshod over the facts in both the news and editorial columns, perhaps in an effort to protect the unity of its circulation base. Sadly, that newspaper has never really campaigned for positive solutions to the real problems of "local" government.

Will individuals ever accept the responsibility to seek information outside the media? Can we avoid believing the spin doctors and political commercials sponsored by private interests?

Is there any individual with the resources to take on the special interests?

“Valley secession” barely carried a majority of voters in favor in the San Fernando Valley, and in Hollywood the news was even worse, with 68% of the voters of Hollywood voting against the reestablishment of the City of Hollywood. Citywide the vote against Hollywood’s creation was only 71% against. Gene La Pietra, touting himself as a “businessman and philanthropist,” was making a big push to be elected Mayor at the same time. In spite of spending millions he got only 40% of the people to support his candidacy; his checkered past certainly hurt him. The City of Hollywood made sense. The area looks like a poor cousin of Los Angeles, and needs self-government.

In defeat, the proponents of reorganization talked about forming boroughs, a measure already considered and abandoned by the Los Angeles City Council. The Los Angeles City Council members kept their huge salaries and big staffs. The *Los Angeles Times* kept its core area intact, and the good old boys could continue to deal “with the devils they know rather than the devils they don’t.” Ultimately, the talk of reform died out, as it did after the failure of the second Canyon County formation effort in 1978.

“Good government” is not a sexy issue. The public would rather vote for tax reduction or term limits than deal with the basic problem of creating a proper system of government for the twenty-first century. As we gut government programs in the name of tax reduction we see the imposition of fees for service, the flourishing of expensive private schools and the proliferation of private security services. People who used to scream about high taxes shell out thousands of dollars more because government no longer provides decent services. Those who cannot afford private security complain that their insurance premiums are going sky high.

We have lost control of the politicians because we have supervisorial districts with populations of about 2,000,000 in Los Angeles County. Our senate districts run about 900,000 in California, and our assembly districts 450,000. Who but the special interests can put together a campaign to win election in this kind of government? Apathy in the City of Los Angeles, where a council district contains more than a quarter of a million people, reigns supreme. It only takes about 7,000 votes to elect a councilmember because of the low turnout of the electorate.

We need to ask our city leaders in Santa Clarita if they are willing to work on the problem of big government, and we need to make it possible for the mayor to have the time and resources to represent us vigorously at the county, state and federal levels. We need to give our officials the moral support they deserve, a cheering section when they need it, and a pat on the back when they do a job well.

Turning to the county level of government, the Los Angeles County Charter is a far better document than it was in the early 1970s. However, at thirty-seven pages when printed out from the internet, it is still obsolete, not having been revised extensively since 1984. It would be far better reading if the footnotes were printed as end notes. It would be a lot shorter if it were adopted in a revised form, omitting the articles and sections that have been repealed, and renumbering them consecutively.<sup>2</sup>

Of course the idea of fixing the county charter is as boring as the two pages of suggestions in Appendix A, none of which really deal with the core issues. It is not my intent to get political about the charter, but simply to show that there are some weird provisions.

An extensive revision of the county charter will not resolve the overwhelming problem of big government being entirely out of control. Los Angeles County needs to be totally reorganized into perhaps seven counties, including Canyon County and Antelope County.

The State of California needs a high level of attention and participation. We can petition for a convention of elected delegates to place either constitutional revision or a new constitution on the ballot, or we can split the state. Perhaps we should do both.

Northern California counties have already taken a vote concerning splitting the state, put on the ballot by the Boards of Supervisors of the respective counties. The people supported it with a positive vote in every northern county but Sacramento, which voted to join the north if a split was realized. A major problem is the distribution of water. However, a business deal should resolve that problem. Why not look at the subsidies received by Northern California and use them to work out a formula for payment of the water received by Southern California, and make approval of the proposed contract part of the split?

For that matter, why stop at splitting the state in two? Certainly California could be split into three or more states. A major problem is that the people have lost control over state government because it is so vast, and the regions of the state are so different that many of our representatives in Sacramento have no real interest in problems outside their own areas.

This argument points up the major problem with government. It has simply grown too big. We tried to cut the size with Canyon County. We were successful when we formed Santa Clarita, at least as long as a campaign cost a reasonable amount of money. People feel dissatisfied, but have not stopped to think about the basic steps to resolve the problems at county and state levels. There we have no control over our destiny, let alone our county supervisor. None of the supervisors has shown an interest in getting to the root of the problem by splitting the county.

Although California has come close to a split several times, no one has followed through. The very idea is a little terrifying, because most people do not have a clue about government, and it may take a demagogue to lead the movement. Just as Howard Jarvis won overwhelming support for tax reform but did a terrible job in the details, so could a demagogue botch a move against big government. This is all the more reason for our cities and counties, and our state legislature, to take a hard look at a state with a population larger than 158 of the 192 countries listed by the United Nations?

The political and economic leadership in our state should sit down and work on the issue, starting now. However, they probably never will until some demagogue pushes them, and then it will be too late. A viable solution may be

a very simple proposition requiring a convention of elected delegates, followed by a popular vote on the constitutional provisions they propose.

If the size of government is such an issue, why not break up the United States? I do not take our national government seriously enough to get excited about it. They deliver the mail, and if we broke up our country, mail delivery would probably deteriorate. The protection of our rights would become a big issue. National defense would be more difficult. The very cornerstone of the United States is a Constitution which is so short that anyone who really wants to can grasp it, and so well thought out that there have been very few amendments.

Moreover, when George Kenney made a proposal to increase the size of the House of Representatives in early 2004, with the idea of making Members of Congress more responsive to the people than to special interests, it attracted the attention of less than two dozen policy wonks, and died in weeks for lack of input.<sup>3</sup>

However, anyone who thinks our California Constitution is worth protecting should call a state assembly member's office and ask for a copy. The phone number can be found in most telephone books in the gray pages in front of the pink or white pages. Those who cannot find it should call city hall and ask for the number.

In short, our state constitution, written in 1879 and shaped somewhat like that of Iowa, has been amended more than five hundred times since then, and is so long and so sleep inducing reading that it is pathetic.

And nobody cares.

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<sup>1</sup>United Nations Population Division, "Total Population by Sex and Sex Ratio, by Country, 2003," in *World Population Prospects: The 2002 Revision* (2003), 25-29, easily found by typing "nations populations" into google.com (internet).

<sup>2</sup>To find the charter go to [municipalcodes.lexisnexis.com/codes/lacounty/](http://municipalcodes.lexisnexis.com/codes/lacounty/).

<sup>3</sup>George Kenney, "How to Fix Politics? Believe It or Not, More Politicians," *Los Angeles Times*, 20 Jan. 2004.