No political event that has occurred in the last decade has given me as much pleasure as has the passage of Proposition 13.

My pleasure while undoubtedly stemming in part from the tweaking of the imperial spenders comes more, however, from the thrill of watching this remarkable and resilient form of government profoundly readjust itself to the wishes of its electorate.

The action in California which is the beginning of a national movement gave proof to the warning of Alexis De Tocqueville in his democracy in America. Although writing in 1839, De Tocqueville's anticipation of contemporary problems was profound.

The contemporary relevance of his work particularly in this overregulated society was set forth in the final section of his summation of the "Influence of Democratic Ideas and Feeling on Political Society."

In his chapter titled "What Sort of Despotism Democratic Nations Have to Fear" he begins by observing: "I have noticed during my stay in the United States that a democratic state of society similar to that found there could lay itself peculiarly open to the establishment of a despotism".

He speaks of the limitation to tyranny presented to even the emperors of Rome by virtue of distance and varying customs of those under their dominance, and that the burden of Rome fell on a few select targets, but he ruminates "doubtless in such an age of education and equality as our own, rulers could more easily bring all public powers into their own hands alone, and they could impinge deeper and more habitually into the sphere of private interests than was ever possible in antiquity. But the same equality which makes despotism easy, tempers it".

And De Tocqueville does not expect democratic leaders to be tyrants, but rather "schoolmasters". Oh how relevant today!

He continues: "thus I think that the type of oppression which threatens democracies is different from anything there has ever been in the world before. Our contemporaries will find no prototype of it in their memories. I have myself vainly searched for a word which will exactly express the whole of the conception I have formed. Such old words as "Despotism" and "Tyranny" do not fit. The thing is new and as I cannot find a word for it, I must try to define it. I am trying to imagine under what novel features despotism may appear in the world".

De Tocqueville then describes the future state as "Benign" and "Parental". It provides for their security, foresees and supplies their necessities, facilitates their pleasures, manages their principal concerns, directs their industry, makes rules for their testaments and divides their inheritances. Why should it not entirely relieve them from the trouble of thinking and all the cares of living".

Having thus taken each citizen in turn in its powerful grasp and shaped him to its will, government then extends its embrace to include the whole of society. It covers the whole of social life with a network of petty, complicated rules that are both minute and uniform, through which even men of the greatest originality and the most vigorous temperament cannot force their heads above the crowd. It does not break men's will, but softens, bends, and guides it; it seldom enjoins, but often inhibits, action; it does not destroy anything, but prevents much being born; it is not all tyrannical, but it hinders, restrains, enervates, stifles, and stultifies so much that in the end each nation is not more than a flock of timid and hard-working animals with the government as its shepherd.

I have always thought that this brand of orderly,
gentle, peaceful slavery which I have just described could be combined, more easily than is generally supposed, with some of the external forms of freedom, even under the shadow of the sovereignty of the people.

Our contemporaries are ever a prey to two conflicting passions: they feel the need of guidance, and they long to stay free. Unable to wipe out these two contradictory instincts, they try to satisfy them both together. Their imagination conceives a government which is unitary, protective, and all-powerful, but elected by the people. Centralization is combined with the sovereignty of the people. That gives them a chance to relax. They console themselves for being under schoolmasters by thinking that they have chosen them themselves. Each individual lets them put the collar on, for he sees that it is not a person, or a class of persons, but society itself which holds the end of the chain.

Under this system the citizens quit their state of dependence just long enough to choose their master and then fall back into it.

A great many people nowadays very easily fall in with this brand of compromise between administrative despotism and the sovereignty of the people. They think they have done enough to guarantee personal freedom when it is to the government of the state that they have handed it over. That is not good enough for me. I am much less interested in the question who my master is than in the fact of obedience.”

As for De Tocqueville’s preference, he states: “For my part, I should be inclined to think that liberty is less necessary in great matters than in tiny ones if I imagined that one could ever be safe in the enjoyment of one sort of freedom with the other”.

And finally he speaks the most remarkable phrase and one which is completely contemporary, and describes why we are here today discussing hospital advocacy programs.

“Those democratic peoples which have introduced freedom into the sphere of politics, while allowing despotism to grow in the administrative sphere, have been led into the strangest paradoxes”.

To give credence to De Tocqueville’s warning that apparently has surfaced in California, but for those of you who may be momentarily persuaded to accept Senator George McGovern’s opinion the Californians “had acted on a degrading hedonism” that tells them “to ask what they can take from the needy” and his observation that he saw “undertones of racism” in the vote; an excerpt from the current issue of Commentary may dispel that odious view. The article reports “what is noteworthy, however, is how many voters with an apparent interest in the defeat of Proposition 13, nevertheless went for it: 44 percent of families of public employees, 47 percent of renters, and 42 percent of blacks. In these categories, the majority who voted opposed proposition 13; but in every economic category, it was the other way around. Thus the measure was supported by 55 percent of those with incomes under $8,000; 66 percent of those in $8-15,000 bracket; 67 percent of those in the $15-25,000 bracket; and 61 percent of those with incomes above $25,000.

A similarly mixed picture appears when we look at the vote in terms of ideological categories. As might have been expected, 82 percent of self-designated “conservatives” voted for the measure. Yet, here too, what is noteworthy is the large number of self-described “moderates” (63 percent) who voted for it.

Clearly then the victory of proposition 13 represents something more complex than a triumph of selfishness and/or old line conservatism”.

Later on the author of that article asks the essential question: “But the tax revolt raises a more practical and immediate question as well, will the politicians quickly enough recognize and accomodate to the growing neoliberal (or if one prefers, neoconservative) mood, or will they misread it, one way or another, according to their predilections?”

Regardless of political predilection, it seems clear that the American electorate feels threatened and is acting against the sort of administrative despotism warned about by De Tocqueville nearly one hundred and fifty years ago.

With these warnings and favorable events, one would think that those concerned with health care would be beginning to see the merits to its economy by the lessening of administrative despotisms.

Yet, when I stand back and look at American health care politics, I am reminded of the British Ambassador to the United Nations, Sir Gladwin Jebb referring to the Russians interchangeable use of the words War and Peace as “upside down language.” Surely health care has its own “upside down” language and economics.

Our brand of upside down economics stems from the passage of Title 18 “Medicare” and Title 19 “Medicaid” when the federal government assumed responsibility for nearly 55% of the nation’s hospital bill. This has led to a dual and contradictory role for the government. These roles are an increasingly dominant paymaster for health care, while at the same time an increasingly frugal uncle attempting to instill financial discipline and restraint by means of increased regulation on the offspring it has created.

At the same time and in a matter of just a few short years, a counter movement to deregulate large segments of the rest of the economy, such as the