

## Other Viewpoints

### Get mad at greed, not government

When asked his opinion on tea party anti-government protests, Kansas Gov. Mark Parkinson, on a visit to Hutchinson last week, made a wise observation.

The protesters have a right to be mad, he said, but they are mad at the wrong people.

They should not be mad at state government, for one, because state government has to balance its budget, unlike the federal government. And the state has cut spending by about \$1 billion over the past year to stay within its means.

“What’s happened in Kansas is that when times are very good, when we have lots of revenue, we cut taxes for wealthy people. When times are bad, we cut services for everyone else,” Parkinson said. “And so they should be mad.”

Mad about the greed that has starved state government.

Parkinson overgeneralized some in that statement, but then one of the problems with the tea party movement is over-generalizing. Tea party activists tend to treat all government as bad, and Parkinson is right that the way state government operates its budget is nothing like the federal.

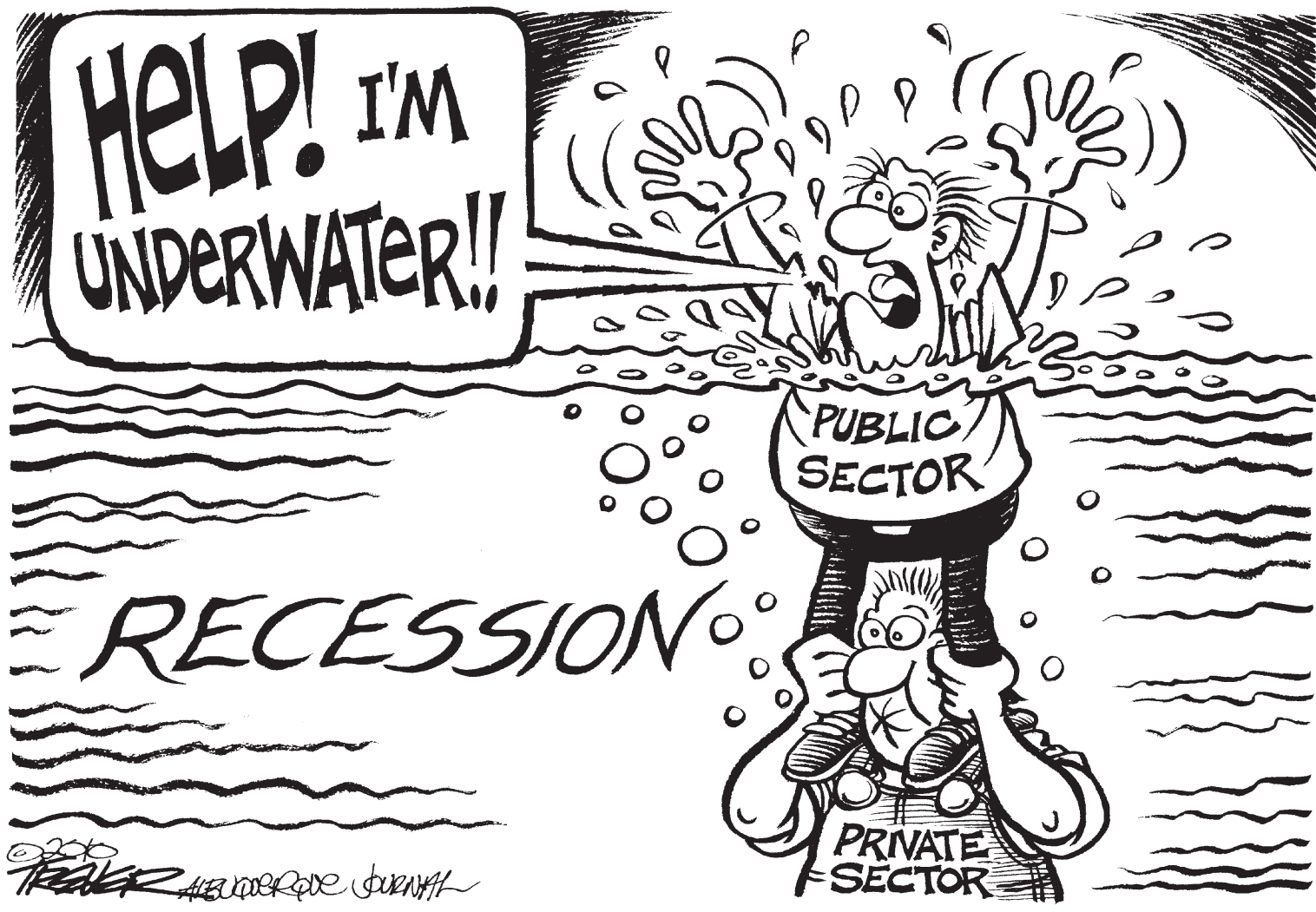
He also is right about who usually benefits from cuts and who usually bears the pain of spending cuts, and that is the point.

In Kansas, Parkinson refers to the tax cuts over the last decade or so that primarily have benefited special interests, corporations and the rich. He refers to the litany of tax exemptions and the elimination of the estate tax. Parkinson blames that tax policy, not just the slow economy, on the fiscal position of the state today. It has forced Parkinson to cut state services, and the three biggest chunks of the state budget are schools, colleges and social services for the poor, elderly and disabled.

The bottom line of that equation is that the lower and middle classes have gotten the short end of the stick.

The tea parties likely look at all government as the same, and they have a legitimate beef with out-of-control spending in Washington. But any ire directed at Topeka needs to be directed to the architects of state tax policy, who typically are the same legislators who now think the state should continue to cut services to its neediest citizens.

— *The Hutchinson News, via The Associated Press*



### Secular holiday offers hope for religion

As you read this, Easter 2010 will be history. The clearance sales on baskets and plastic eggs will be under way, and many parents will be dusting off their hands and saying, “Well, that’s one more out of the way.”

At Easter, perhaps even more than at Christmas, the sharp contrast between sacred and secular is pronounced.

Easter is really the oldest Christian holy day, with its roots to be found in the very practice of worshipping on “the Lord’s Day” – Sunday – rather than on the last day of the week as in Judaism.

It doesn’t adapt well to secular commercialism. There’s no long-standing tradition of gift giving on which to piggyback an orgy of addictive consumer spending, such as Christmas carries.

Yet American culture has adapted. Plastic eggs, stuffed bunnies, and massive amounts of specially-marketed sweets all add up to giving retail sales a springtime boost to tide them over between Valentine’s and St. Patrick’s days – other secularized holy days – and Mother’s Day – a holiday invented solely by the greeting card industry.

While nonchurch folks have the aforementioned plastic eggs, Christians recognize Holy Week, starting with Palm Sunday and moving through Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter, as the season representing the very core of their faith.

By the way, the question came up the other day about the meaning of the word Maundy. For your bit of trivia for the day, it refers specifically to the washing of the feet of the poor.



**Marian Ballard**

#### • Collection Connections

The original Latin word is “mandatum,” or “commandment of God” – related to mandate, and comes from the beginning of the Latin prayer for foot-washing.

For many churches, the season involves extra services, extra music, and extra people. There are cantatas, requiems, services that end in darkness, services that begin at sunrise – all aimed at re-enacting, commemorating, instructing, reminding the Christian of the central tenets of the faith – that Jesus Christ was not just an itinerant preacher who did some good things; that rather he was the perfect son of God who was unjustly executed and overcame the very power of death itself to live eternally.

It’s hard, when you’re stretching your mind to grasp these huge, eternal ideas, to recognize that your neighbor’s idea of Easter is baby chicks, marshmallow bunnies, and bright-colored baskets. Public schools don’t have Easter break, as they did when I was a child. That doesn’t mean they don’t have a break, but they can’t say it’s for Easter. So there’s a pointless extra day off, unconnected to much but bunnies. And let’s face it, the Easter bunny can’t hold a candle to Santa Claus.

Yet in all this trivialization of Easter, there is also a note of hope. Many important days in the church year are almost completely unknown outside the church itself. All Saints Day is tagged primarily as the day after Halloween. Christmas is thought to be over on Dec. 26, ignoring the fact that it started out as a 12-day celebration, and only at the end did the Wise Men come into it, on Epiphany.

Not one in 50 of those who don’t attend church could say what Pentecost is. If you don’t know, look it up, or better yet, go to a church and ask.

Much has been made of all the things wrong with our country today. I’ll go one more. The language of faith united us when diversity meant Lutherans and Catholics, Presbyterians and Baptists. The language of faith persisted in giving us common ground when diversity began to include others. Yet those who express no faith seem to lack a basic compass to define right and wrong, good and better.

If the only reason you know about Christianity is Christmas and Easter, you are still connected to a great tradition. You’ve got a starting point to become anchored in a tradition that doesn’t just say, “It’s spring!” but dares to say “Jesus lives!”

Easter isn’t over. He still lives. So, happy Easter.

*Marian Ballard has collected careers as counselor, librarian, pastor, and now copy editor for the Colby Free Press. She collects ideas, which are more portable than other stuff.*

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### Bury the death tax on the family farm

The fondest wish of most farmers is to pass their land on to their children. They work a lifetime to leave a legacy for a daughter or son who will one day take over the family farm.

Preservation of farming and ranching operations for future generations is being threatened. Estate taxes are especially harmful to farmers and ranchers because their businesses are what we call capital-intensive, with a high concentration of assets tied up in land, buildings and equipment – but little cash.

Estate taxes tend to be more burdensome for farms than many small businesses because 80 percent of farm and ranch assets involve land. When estate taxes exceed cash and other liquid assets, surviving family members may be forced to sell land, buildings or equipment needed to keep the business operating.

This has a multiplier effect, because rural communities and the businesses they support also suffer when farms and ranches downsize or disappear. Also, farmland close to urban centers is often lost forever to development when estate taxes force farm families to sell off pieces to pay taxes.

The estate tax expired for one year and one year only on Jan. 1. This coming Jan. 1, unless Congress acts and does so soon, the estate tax will return and carry an exceedingly low \$1 million exemption – anything above \$1 million will be taxed at 55-percent. This will harm most family farming and ranching operations.

The talk on Capitol Hill is that the Senate will take action on estate tax reform after the Memorial Day recess. Before Christmas, the House passed a permanent extension of the estate tax at 2009 rates. This carries a \$3.5 mil-



**John Schlageck**

#### • Insights Kansas Farm Bureau

lion exemption for individuals and \$7 million for couples, while taxing the rest of the value of the estate at 45 percent.

The “off-again, on-again nature” of estate tax law makes it difficult, if not impossible, for farmers and ranchers to engage in planning for the transfer of a family business from one generation to the next.

While estate tax planning may be able to protect some family farms and ranches from the devastation of estate taxes, planning tools are costly and take money needed to operate and expand businesses. Even with planning, changing asset values and family situations make it impossible to guarantee that a well-thought-out estate plan will protect a family business from estate taxes.

Farmers and ranchers who belong to Farm Bureau back permanent repeal of federal estate taxes. Until permanent repeal is achieved, Farm Bureau calls for an exemption of \$10 million per person, indexed for inflation. The \$10 million exemption may sound high, but it really isn’t when you factor in land costs and other variables, particularly in areas where land values are high.

The estate tax amounts to double taxation, because the income is taxed first when it is

earned and again when it is transferred to heirs. Eliminating the estate tax will encourage farmers and ranchers to keep their businesses in the family.

As a result, farm families can continue the mission of providing food, fuel and fiber for America and the world. It would be a travesty if the next generation was forced to abandon the farm just to pay the taxes.

*John Schlageck of the Kansas Farm Bureau is a leading commentator on agriculture and rural Kansas. He grew up on a diversified farm near Seguin, and his writing reflects a lifetime of experience, knowledge and passion.*

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• Bruce Tinsley

