

POINTS OF VIEW

# Dems call for controls on privatizing services

It was, to use Yogi Berra's simile, "like deja vu all over again." Democratic state legislators sounded like free market economists last week as they denounced the Engler Administration's work in deinstitutionalizing mental patients and placing them in privately-operated group homes.

The occasion was an investigative series in The Detroit News by Sheila Gruber and John Wark on abuse and financial exploitation by adult care home operators. It seems many operators underfed and mistreated their charges while treating themselves to foreign luxury cars.

Wark, as many know, is a cohort of mine on the Michigan Freedom of Information Committee.

A month earlier, I chaired a panel discussion before a Women In Communications Inc. convention in Troy. Our topic was "Privatization: Impact on Public Access." A Wark colleague observed that when government awards contracts to private business to do governmental work, contractors hide what

they're doing as if it were, well, private. Then came the guru of privatization in Michigan — economist Charles Van Eaton of Hillsdale College. Van Eaton writes tracts for the Mackinac Center about how Detroit would be better off peddling Cobo Center because it's such a drain on the municipal coffers. "You folks need to really birddog these guys," Van Eaton told us media types. "Don't let them get away with (claims the business) is private. It's always public."

Van Eaton's advice: ■ Proposed contracts should be studied carefully by the public and media before they are awarded.

■ Government must have excellent staffers monitoring contractors' performance. That was the whole point of the Gruber-Wark series.

And so liberal Democratic senators sounded exactly like the free market guru last week as they denounced group home operators and Engler.

"There's no accountability," said Sen. Jim Beryman, D-Adrian. "We need a program of proper licensing and



TIM RICHARD

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monitoring." "Deinstitutionalization has its

place. It's how the program has been implemented," added Senate minority floor leader John Cherry, D-Clio.

Though hopelessly outnumbered 22 to 16, Senate minority leader Art Miller, D-Warren, established a Democratic task force on mental health, chaired by Berryman, "to bring accountability, responsibility and decency into mental health service delivery in the community."

Rep. Pat Gagliardi, D-Drummond Island, said the House Oversight and Ethics Committee would hold hearings "on the appalling treatment of mentally ill and developmentally disabled citizens in the mental health system," adding, "This is a textbook example of privatization gone awry."

Even Republican Sen. Robert Geake of Northville repeated the lesson: "We need to put more time and effort into monitoring contracts."

There was a double irony. Democrats not only were talking like Van Eaton, but were praising a newspaper that for

years had editorially blistered their progovernment propensities.

Democrats talked as if Gov. John Engler invented privatization of mental care. In truth, the movement started in the late 1970s with Gov. William Milliken, a moderate Republican, and was cheerfully, although quietly, continued in the '80s by Gov. James Blanchard, a moderate Democrat. Engler's contribution was to make an ideological point of it.

I take dim views of both socialism (government in business) and privatization (business in government).

There's room for government to contract with businesses to pave roads and perform maintenance functions. But conducting elections, supervising prisons, caring for the mentally ill, protecting natural resources and administering justice are governmental jobs.

And the doors and books should be open.

Tim Richard reports regularly on the local implications of state and regional events. His office phone is (313) 349-1700.

# Ultimate male role models were the three Stooges

If there's one issue that divides men and women, it's the Stooges — as in Larry, Moe and Curly. Women who claim they don't understand men would be better off renting a Stooges video than watching Phil Donahue. The reason is the Stooges define male behavior.

I've done a serious study of this and will some day ask for a government arts grant to delve deeper into the subject. Hey, if Richard Maltbyhorse could get one for his photos, I could sure get one. It's certainly more interesting to look at how heterosexual males relate to each other.

As part of my study, I quizzed a clerk at a party store in Livonia. The store offers those seltzer bottles, filled, that the Stooges used to squirt each other. There's a waiting list for them. My wife dissuaded me from the purchase, but I still lust after one.

It's one of those items that would look great and be useful when the world got too serious. A squirt in the

face would likely reduce a domestic spat from tragedy to the comic, which is the area in which it should dwell.

It's just too bad women don't see things the same way. The reason is that they think too much, and the Stooges are not for the thinking person. The Stooges are a fall. When men see somebody fall, their first reaction is to laugh. Meanwhile, the women folk have the hospital bill calculated to the penny.

When I was a kid in Detroit in the 1950s, the Stooges were on before school. All the boys in the neighborhood watched, and we re-enacted each scene as we walked to school and later in class. Our timing was perfect; nobody lost an eye to the two-finger Stooge eye gouge.

The trouble was, though, that we continued our antics in the classroom, much to the dismay of the girls and the mostly female teaching staff. Such behavior and the female reaction to it doesn't stop upon graduation



JEFF COUNTS

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from grade school. To this day the females I work with scowl when I do my imitation of Curley's chuckle.

A woman I know tells of dating a man who insisted on doing the Three Stooges imitation when out to dinner, while a bachelor I knew would flee the promise of a romantic evening to make it home by 3 a.m. to watch the Stooges.

One female I know views the antics of football players as an extension of Stooge behavior. "You've got all those guys jumping in a pile and hitting each other." I couldn't argue.

The trouble is women can't see the intellectual side of the boys. Don't laugh. It's there. The Stooges knew that men see things differently than women. They displayed this side in my favorite Stooge episode, which centers on the misunderstanding of the word saloon.

The boys want to go into business, so they stop by a real estate office and buy a beauty of a saloon. Of course the

boys are thinking seltzer water and scotch not pin curlers and hair dryers, which they end up with.

Men, being direct creatures who don't sweat the details as women do, wouldn't think to ask any more about the business. A saloon is a saloon, and it's a good place to be.

But there's the Stooge affect on fashion. One man I know contends the Stooges' hairstyles define those of all men. There's Curly's bald look, Larry's frizzy neo-Afro style, Moe's pre-Beatles mop and Shep's slicked back, but falling down on the sides style that is now in vogue.

The Stooges' films were training manuals for male behavior. But don't tell the feminists. Chances are they would want to ban them.

Jeff Counts is the editor of the Plymouth and Canton Observer Newspapers who looks like Curley but has a Larry-style hair cut. He can be called at 459-2700.



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