

UNION-TRIBUNE EDITORIAL

A slippery practice

Government groups must drop political role

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At the behest of Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association President Jon Coupal and Rep. John Campbell, R-Irvine, the state Fair Political Practices Commission has begun an investigation into whether the League of California Cities, the California Association of Counties and the California Redevelopment Association are using taxpayer dollars to tout Proposition 99, their property rights initiative, and to oppose Proposition 98, a rival measure pushed by Coupal.

Many key facts are not in dispute. The three associations, nonprofit corporations whose basic activities are generally funded by membership fees from government bodies, also generate revenue through advertising bought in their publications, vendor trade shows and other activities.

The groups say the latter revenue – which apparently totals in the millions of dollars annually – can be used for political purposes. Coupal and Campbell argue that since taxpayers provided the seed money for these enterprises, the revenue should still be seen as public money.

We agree. State law is vague, so this practice may well be legal. But it hardly passes the smell test – especially given the comments of Anaheim Mayor Curt Pringle, who told The Orange County Register that there is “a continual commingling” of campaign and general League of California Cities resources.

In an interview, league Executive Director Chris McKenzie said the FPPC complaint was filed solely to gain political advantage and called the commingling allegations “completely untrue.”

But the problem for McKenzie is that whatever the motivations of Coupal and Campbell, they make powerful arguments about the proper use of profits from taxpayer-supported entrepreneurship.

On this issue, the League of California Cities, the California Association of Counties and the California Redevelopment Association may have the law on their side. But that doesn't make them right.

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