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Remembering Human Rights Day

By BERNICE POWELL JACKSON  
FOR THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

December 10 is celebrated as Human Rights Day around the world. I believe that setting aside this day around the world to uplift the importance of Human Rights grew out of World War II and the gross violations of human rights by the Nazi regime. It grew out of a "never again" commitment of world leaders. Human rights—the right of human beings to safety, and to basic needs of home, family, health, education and happiness and the right not to be persecuted because of religion or race or ethnicity is the heart of our civilized world. We in the U.S. often take these rights for granted or blindly refuse to see that even here, in the world's oldest democracy, we do have human rights violations. Let me give a case in point. I believe it's a human rights violation being perpetrated by many of the states against thousands of families in this nation. It's the policy which many states have adopted of charging a high rate for collect calls made by prisoners to their families. The revenue from these exorbitantly high telephone charges goes to the states. For example, New York state earned \$21 million last year on such calls; Ohio earned \$14 million, Illinois \$16 million, Florida \$14 million. In other words, states earned more than \$100 million off of collect telephone

charges made by those incarcerated in their prisons, whose rules they set and which include that inmates are only allowed to make collect calls. In other words, states collected millions of dollars from the mostly poor relatives of those incarcerated—relatives who most not only deal with the loss of their loved one, many of whom are imprisoned long distances from them, but must pay exorbitant telephone charges just to talk with their family members. The states argue that these are prisoners who are incarcerated because of crimes, but family members point out that they are the ones who must pay the high telephone bills. It is not unusual for such bills to reach \$100 or \$200 a month for families which often have already suffered a loss of income from the incarceration of one family member. One New York woman told the story of how her family paid an extra \$100 monthly to allow her incarcerated cousin to speak regularly with his dying mother. Another mother reported spending \$200 per month to speak with her incarcerated son who was fighting cancer and undergoing chemotherapy in prison. Over the past decade, long distance telephone charges have dropped for most Americans. Even the rates for collect calls have fallen, and most of us have options about which company to use for long distance

calls, including collect. But the families of prisoners do not enjoy these lower rates. In the words of Gerald Norlander, deputy director of the Public Utility Law Project, "The prison system seeks to generate the most revenue possible from the phone system." Thus, in New York inmates must pay the operator-assisted dialing rate, a rate far higher than a direct-dialed call. Some states add on surcharges. Federal inmates, on the other hand, are allowed to dial direct, using debit cards, which proves that the argument sometimes offered by states that requiring prisoners to make all calls collect is their way of protecting against telephone fraud by inmates is a false one. Inmate families realize that public sympathy for prisoners is at its lowest today, but nevertheless some families have filed lawsuits claiming that the charges are an unfair tax on a small, poor group of individuals who have not been charged or convicted with crimes, but who are forced to pay the state regardless. Prison family groups believe that states should not be in the business of profiting from the families of those they imprison. New York State uses most of its income from the collect telephone calls to pay for health care for prisoners, which the state is required to provide. If health care is a human right, then this exploitative, usurious

practice of charging exorbitant rates for collect telephone calls from prisoners to their families is a violation of the human rights of these prisoners and it is a shameful, morally wrong injustice to their families.

That Fellow Behind the Tree

By PAUL R. FARAGO  
FOR THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

A spate of new tax measures are headed for the November 2000 ballot. It's not too soon to review some basics, or else during the tax shuffle you might get dealt a bad hand. The art of modern taxation is best understood by examining the words of U.S. Sen. Russell Long, D-La who served from 1948-86, and for 16 years as powerful chairman of the Senate Finance Committee: "Tax reform means, 'Don't tax you, don't tax me. Tax that fellow behind the tree.'" Sen. Long was a 38-year incumbent accustomed to cutting deals with lobbyists. He expected everyone to leap into the political influence feeding frenzy. If not, then like "that fellow behind the tree", unobservant

of what's going on at the legislature, you could get hit with a tax increase. Sen. Long also revealed the most important rule of modern taxation—concealment. Thus, we have different types of taxes on earnings, investment, saving and purchases; myriad licensing and permitting fees; we even have taxes on taxes. And, of course, we have death taxes and non-reciprocal interest and penalties on tax errors. Perhaps the most insidious form of taxation is through arbitrary business taxation. Instead of being collected directly, the cost of government gets built into prices individuals pay for products and services consumed in ordinary private transactions. We surrender a record share of our money to taxation as a result of a century of tax proliferation. A dubious

milestone was reached last year. Targeted tax credits, exemptions and preferences for the politically influential now amount to more than the total taxes we all pay—another legacy of Sen. Long's artistry. In this regime, no single tax is so great that non-compliance is worth the risk. A tax system in the U.S. that fully disclosed its costs, however, would have to admit that government consumes more than 50% of average incomes—and that might trigger civil disobedience. After all, the Boston Tea Party, a response to the Townshend Acts of 1767, protested a duty of just "three pence a pound on tea." Across America, public coffers are flush from the growth of the

Please see "Tree" page 6

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