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## Chief economist's departure is troubling

By [Bob Bernick Jr.](#)

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With the quick retirement last week of longtime Utah Tax Commission chief economist Doug Macdonald, a lingering question in state politics once again surfaces.

What is the balance between objective, differing opinions and the monolithic executive and legislative branches of state government, where especially in Republican-dominated Utah differing points of view are often not accepted, sometimes not even tolerated?

First a disclaimer: I've known Macdonald for 25 years. I've found him to be honest, straightforward and professional in his economic/tax work.

As the head of a small, but talented, three-person economic unit for the Tax Commission, Macdonald's tax collection/economic prediction models have, over time, been some of the most accurate in all state governments.

The tax reports, combined with a fiscal conservative policy by the GOP-run Legislature and a string of Republican governors, have resulted in Utah consistently being named by various groups as one of the best-run states in the nation.

It was Macdonald's professional discussions about GOP Gov. Jon Huntsman's "fairer/flatter" rate income tax proposal, which will go before a May special legislative session, that prematurely ended Macdonald's long career.

You see, Macdonald was telling some people in private, and even sometimes in public, that all was not perfect with Huntsman's reform. Some individuals and groups, like retired senior citizens, could see their taxes go up (if only slightly) under the Huntsman plan — or at the very least, the wealthiest among us would get more of a benefit under "reform" than would middle-income Utahns.

Some GOP legislators have been battling Macdonald, et al., in the Tax Commission for some time. Longtime advocates of tax changes in Utah, like the Utah Taxpayer Association, have also had run-ins with Macdonald and his economic unit before — public battles over tax policy as well as private fights over how much of a fiscal note to place on tax-cutting legislation.

Now, in talking with Macdonald, he clearly says that such fights, while tiresome and perhaps even troubling in a public policy type of way, were a part of his taking early retirement at age 58. It must be said that like thousands of other veteran state workers Macdonald decided to leave early to get a very generous post-retirement state health insurance program.

Last Friday was the deadline to retire and get extra health insurance before a 2005 legislative cutback in workers' benefits kicked in.

The benefits, added to a memo sent to the economic unit by Tax Commissioner Palmer DePaulis warning the economists not to give their personal tax policy opinions under threat of disciplinary action, led Macdonald to get out.

The memo, which DePaulis shared with me, is just another step in what I've seen over the years as an extension of what could be called a "you will march in line" mentality.

Republicans have been in control of both the state House and Senate for 25 years. We've not had a Democratic governor in 20 years.

Over time, I've seen not only the top levels of state government become more and more Republican, but now the non-partisan staffs of the Legislature itself have become more Republican/conservative.

In a way, I suppose this is to be expected. But it is troubling to see politics force its way into the supposedly non-partisan, professional staff of the Tax Commission — where four gubernatorial-appointed commissioners are supposed to insulate tax staffers.

In addition to GOP politics, Utah has a unique social strata. Between 60 percent and 70 percent of Utahns belong to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. More than 80 percent of the 104 part-time legislators are LDS.

Many, if not most, of the Republican members of the Legislature (and some Democrats, as well) are or have been lay LDS leaders. LDS wards and stakes are natural political constituencies for bishops, counselors and stake presidents who decide to run for office.

So into the political mix of Utah we see one-party domination and a social sense of not questioning authority figures.

In the public forum, the lesson of Macdonald and others is clear: Shape up, fly right, get with the program or get gone.

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