

Tape 22, Side 1

CH This is an interview with Governor Victor Atiyeh at his office in downtown Portland, Oregon. The interviewer, for the Oregon Historical Society, is Clark Hansen. The date is 2/9/93, and this is Tape 22, Side 1.

A couple of other comments here in terms of your voting, how you voted and reacted to bills. One person commented, He might, as he did on Measure 11 - I presume this is in the 1977 session. Wasn't there a six and an eleven?

VA That's right.

CH It says, He supports it just to give people a chance to express it. Is that a common way of approaching a bill, that maybe you think the bill has some merit, you might vote against it, but you'll support it just because - or another legislator, in fact, might support it just because they feel that it should be put before the people to decide?

VA It's going to vary. You recall earlier in our tapes I said that I was sent down there to make the hard decisions as well as the easy ones, and I meant just exactly that. But there are times in which - well, I voted - you recall we talked about a sales tax. I voted to go before the people. I made it clear at the time I don't support it. As a matter of fact, I had a motivation at that point in time, was that I thought it would go out and be defeated and we'd put the whole thing to bed for a while. And so, yes, that time I did that sort of thing. And so it's going to - I'd have to try to remember issues at a time, but it would vary. If it was something like sending to the people the right to vote for drinking at age eighteen, I would have voted no. It's not that I didn't want to deny them; they can

always refer bills if they want to. It's just that I didn't think it was the right thing, and, obviously, there was mixed feelings out there. Anyway, that was my decision. So it's very hard to dissect, you know, what's going on in your mind at a certain period of time. But by and large, I tried to be, at least to my way of thinking, reasonable and fair in whatever decisions I made.

CH The person goes on to say, Or he might support it, the measure, to place his name in the "aye" column, thus bettering his position groups and rating services.

VA That's never true. Never. Never has been. I just - it's hard for people to believe what I'm saying, but I have never committed myself to run for reelection or election. At that period of time, obviously, there was an opportunity to run for governor again. I made no commitment to that. But it's hard for people to believe that. It's not what politicians do.

CH Were you thinking about running for governor in these terms intervening between the previous time you ran?

VA No, no. And I say that with a great deal of certainty, because one of the things that I wanted to do was to make sure that that thought was never in my mind when I voted on an issue. I just - I didn't want that. I wanted to avoid that. And so the best thing to do is say, I'm not running for election or reelection. I'm here now, I'm going to vote on these things now. We'll talk about that later on. And, as I told you earlier, when I was elected governor, it took me at least a year to get my staff to really believe that I wasn't committed to run for reelection for governor. I work hard at that. It was for my own state of mind, is what I was dealing with. So that was - I

flatly say that's wrong. That would be their perception, that's what politicians do. That's just not something I did.

CH And it went on to say, quote, Or in sensing that a bill is going to pass anyway (as senate minority leader with influence over only five of thirty votes, this happens a lot), Atiyeh might support a measure as a political bargaining tool to get some Democrats to support for some other bill more precious to senate Republicans.

VA This must have been Willamette Week [laughter].

CH I'll go back and check this. This does sound like their type of journalism. They're interviewing somebody - as I recall, they're interviewing somebody in the legislature.

VA Well, that is completely false. And again, I say that because I did not one time in twenty years trade a vote. And we'll get into that situation when we get to the governor part in relation to the Rajneesh. But I never did. I don't recall if - do you remember talking about balloon bread and minimum price to the milk distributor and Senator Boivin? I think we did. That's probably a pretty good demonstration. I just told him flat out he's got a lousy bill and it wasn't coming out of committee. It's the only time - actually, I remember that vividly because it was the only time I came close to - he didn't say, You get mine out and I'll get yours out. He didn't say that, but it was pretty clear what he was saying, at least to me. And so I remember that because it was the only time that anybody even tried to make a trade with me. I just didn't trade, period. I would say that probably I may have lost some things that I would have liked to have seen passed if I was in a trade, but once you start down that trail, there's no way you ever get off of that

trail. You're in it. It's this matter of being a little bit pregnant. There's no way in the world it can happen. So, you know, I just didn't do it.

Now, we oftentimes hear - either it would be someone in the legislative body or some reporter, because these were not unknown, these things did^h on, and it's hard to believe that there's a politician that didn't do that sort of thing. That's just^A "They all do it," kind of thing. So I can understand from their perspective. That's the way their mind works, that's what they would do; ergo, everybody else does it. I didn't. Not one time. And I say that with a great deal of pride because, you know, this sort of stuff was going on. And why do I remember one time? You know, I can remember one time. If there's a whole bunch, you don't - oh, I don't remember. You know, I may have done it. You know, when you have a whole bunch, you can't remember them. I remember the one time. Anyway, that's an observation that's wrong, but I can understand why somebody would make it.

CH Well, the final observation was, quote, He might vote to send a bill back to committee to have it cleaned up, as he did with the bottle bill, stirring belief among observers that his ploy is to have the bill tabled, but if the bill springs back and is assured of passage, he might support it, leaving doubt in the minds of voting record tabulators just where he stood in the first place.

VA Yeah. There are those that would be afraid to do that, afraid in the sense they didn't want to have somebody believe that they're against it. This was a popular thing at that point in time. But again, I remember telling you I did the unthinkable, I read bills, and if we follow that particular sequence - again, I'm going to recount something that's probably

already - I know is on the tape. Betty Roberts - it was out of her committee, and she was leading the debate on the bill. I went up to her - she was the chair of the committee - and said, "Betty, this is a problem." I think it was a definition of the container or something, I don't recall, and I pointed it out to her. I was aware it was going to be controversial once it passed and that we better make it as good as we can. She agreed. Now, that bill could not have gone back to committee if she did not agree. I'm one Republican out of a handful, and with a very sexy bill. But she agreed. Actually, as I recall, [she] took it back to committee, made the amendment that I pointed out, and I think brought it back the next day. It wasn't more than a day in between. And then it passed. And I would do that, I would do that. I just took my job pretty doggone seriously in the sense that, to me, being a legislator was not a game. We talked about trading votes and going along and all the rest of it. It's not a game. What we do is going to affect Oregonians, or what we don't do is going to affect Oregonians. I took that pretty serious.

Incidentally, on the bottle bill - I think again I said, but it wouldn't hurt to say again, that the real one defect, and it was not something you could change at that point in time, was that I don't think we really treated the collection center, which is the grocery store or the supermarket, I don't think we treated them very well. And when others called, and years later other states, I always pointed that out to them that if you're going to do something in terms of a bottle bill, really see if you can treat the collection center a little bit better than we did.

CH Were you on any interim committees that you recall during that time, after the '77 legislature?

VA I don't recall.

CH There was a five-day special session in 1978 for the two tax levy plans. Of course, this would have been right in the middle of your campaign in September, from September fifth to the ninth. Those were the Measures 6 and 11. As I understood, Governor Straub was against Measure 6 and you were for Measure 11?

VA Measure 11 was his. Six was on the ballot, and he was trying in some way to respond to six terms of the campaign. He was calling a special session. This was a campaign thing.

CH And you were against Measure 11?

VA Well, yeah, but I think I voted for that in order to give him a chance to get his views out.

CH Here is an example, then, of what we were just talking about where you might...

VA Yeah. That was kind of interesting. Kind of interesting in the sense that we were opponents, he was the governor. Six was very controversial. You asked me about being for six. My first early reaction later on of years past - I mean years after, was that I didn't support six, but I went back to look at a specific speech in which I said I was going to vote for it, but - and followed by that but - that I would work to fix it, because there were some defects in it, and that the whole idea of controlling property taxes was one that I did agree to. In terms of Straub's bill, he called a special session just for that purpose, to get something there against Ballot Measure 6. That was a political thing. I thought, okay, that's his bill and he's the governor. If he want's to get it out there, okay, I'll let him do that. But it was not something that, in terms of a theory of taxation, that I liked. It was just it was his. Again, it's - I'm getting

it kind of all mixed up in trying to figure out, and he did this for that reason and he did that for this. It's hard for me to even recall. I can recall the period, I can recall generally about it. But anyway, yes, that's the way it came, so six and eleven, and they both failed.

CH Well, Measure 6 called for a 1.5 percent limit on property taxes, didn't it?

VA Um-hmm.

CH And it was styled pretty much after the - was it proposition twelve or thirteen?

VA Thirteen, California.

CH Thirteen in California. But in controlling rates and assessments, it ousts the voter as the ultimate jury of the schools' district budget.

VA Yeah. There's two real major faults with it and its succeeding children, son or daughter of whatever - you know, Son of 6, Daughter of 6, whatever - one of which we had mentioned earlier. When you go to a uniform one and a half, it's uneven application on taxing districts around Oregon. Some were at less than one and a half, so the passage wouldn't make any difference to them. As I mentioned earlier, some, like Multnomah County, was at 3 percent, so they'd lose half of their budget. That was the uneven application. The other was freezing the values of property until it was sold. You could own a house, you live in it; the next door neighbor has a similar house, and I come along and buy it. The house is probably worth - if yours is a hundred, maybe it's really worth 150,000. So I come and I buy the house

next door for 150,000. All of a sudden, similar houses are being taxed differently. Same house, or relative value the same. Those are two major defects. And those are the kinds of things I was saying that we needed to - I use the word clean up - if six passes. So in the speech, when I look back, I - because my first thought was, no, I didn't do that, because after that I was a strong vocal opponent to all of those measures, including five, which finally did pass a couple of years ago. When I look back and I - what I said was that I would vote for it. I didn't use the word I supported, I would vote for it - I don't know what the distinction is - but that I would clean it up. That was my answer to six. Maybe somewhat of a waffling answer in terms of the campaign. That's kind of hard to really - for me to figure out.

CH The dilemma, according to the Statesman, was that how to cut taxes while preserving Oregon's longstanding tradition of local control over school and local government budgets.

VA That's right.

CH And you saw it in that light as well?

VA Yes.

CH And it was also said that, How can the state control local budgets without disturbing the voters' right to control them? The plan was voters can approve budgets, but at the point where those budgets exceed the rate of growth in the consumer prices adjusted for any growth in people numbers, the state will stop paying 50 percent of the tab and local property taxpayers will have to foot the excess entirely for local taxes.

VA There's a lot of fallacies in it, there's a lot of dangers in it, and if we take what we have today, there's no allowance for growth, that is, what we're living with now; the people have passed it. It is true the state's making a major contribution; ergo, the local control is sorely eroded. All of those things have come back, all of those things are happening today. Those are all the reasons why Ballot Measure 5 is not a good measure, plus others that we talked about earlier.

CH Was one of these plans, either six or eleven, actually Governor Straub's? He was for Measure 11, but that wasn't really his measure, was it?

VA Yeah, it was his. He introduced it.

CH I thought that Governor Straub had called for a special session in August but didn't have a plan of his own to suggest and asked the legislature to come up with one.

VA What became eleven, if I recall this correctly, was at the request of Governor Straub.

CH Didn't Jason Boe appoint a twenty-one member legislative committee to work out the details of a tax measure before the special session started?

VA Could be. I wasn't part of it.

CH It seems like with all your work on taxation you would have been a part of any...

VA But this is very political. This was Governor Straub's deal. You know, this is a little bit of difference there.

CH I guess, looking at the current problems that the governor is having, Governor Roberts, that if one wanted to - if a governor wanted to get a tax bill through, he would seek bipartisan support in the creation of that tax bill so that it would have more support going through the legislature.

VA That's absolutely true, and we'll talk about that while I was governor. But now we've got a different set of circumstances. We've got Senator Atiyeh running against Governor Straub. He really doesn't want to be against Ballot Measure 6, which had a huge number of signatures in a short period of time. I mean, it was really - it wasn't a squeaker by any means. So he really didn't want to be against it, and, yet, he was against it, so he had to come up with an answer. So, effectively, it was a matter of instead of saying in the campaign, This is what I think we ought to do instead of Ballot Measure 6, he's coming in with a political thing that says, Here, this is my offering in place of six.

CH But weren't you in the same kind of dilemma? I mean in that you were willing to support six only because you agreed that there should be changes in it later on?

VA I liked the idea of reducing property taxes and controlling the growth, and always did, but there was those things that I believed were weaknesses in six, and, as I told you, in succeeding brothers and sisters, and that I would - my purpose was to clean - I used the word clean it up, because that's exactly I had in mind. When I look back on it, it really was not what you'd call a stalwart performance of courage politically. If I were to follow exactly how I feel about, well, okay, I don't like six. It's a lousy deal, and we ought not to vote for it, I don't know what effect it would have had on the campaign. It's

hard to tell. So that was sort of my answer, which I have to - I use the word waffle. I don't know, I suppose to some degree I would look back and maybe apologize for that, because it isn't truly the strength of what I believe in. So I suppose, to the extent that I said I would vote for six and work to clean it up, it would be maybe similar to Straub's not wanting to support six and coming up with his eleven. I suppose they matched in strength of courage on both our parts.

CH The Statesman said that the whole question of school finance comes into play whenever a massive change in the property tax system is discussed because 80 percent of most property tax bills goes to the schools. We had talked a little bit about this last time, I believe. So the results, then, in November on these two measures was what?

VA They both failed.

CH Well, I guess that already brings us up to the point where we're coming into the election, and...

VA Maybe we might do a little recap.

CH Okay.

VA I've thought about, since we started our interviews, you know, you asked me some questions, I'd tell you I can't remember. Although I'm sure, as we get into the governor years, there will be some things I can't remember, that's a little clearer picture. I was trying to think to myself, you know, how come? I don't know if this is the answer, but at least it's one that comes to my own mind. All during my career as a legislator, number one, I was a minority member, rarely a chairman, and I was one of sixty

in the house and one of thirty in the senate, never in a position to say, "Here's a program I think we ought to work on and let's work through it." Never in that position. Always in a position of either killing a bill in committee or trying to improve it in committee, proposing amendments to make it better, à la Senate Bill 100, the land-use planning bill, or when it finally came to, not any committee I was a member of, voting yes or no on it on the floor. And I suppose it's because I was part of a mass rather than one that I have a lot of memory loss beside the years that intervened. A lot of years intervened. And, as I had mentioned to you earlier, I was never in a position of inventorying things because I wasn't going to run again, that is, until I filed to run again. And so if I was always of that mood of saying, okay, I've got to keep an inventory of all this because I'm going to use this when I run again, maybe I would have been a little more lucid on some of your questions.

Going back to our very early discussion, and very consistent with that, common sense and a set of principles. I had a certain belief of our system of government, what it was all about, what it should do and shouldn't do, and that never left me. It made my decisions very easy. Now, whether anyone would agree with my approach to what the philosophy of government is all - well, there are people that have different views on that subject. Anyway, I had my own, and that was always my measuring stick, and it made it very easy. And common sense. It's just - you know, I'd say so many times, Government does things the way nobody else would do them, and that was the common sense part of it. So at times I may have strayed from that a little bit. It's not large enough for me to say to you, Here's where I may have strayed. Sometimes I may have gotten into a gray instead of a black or white. Certainly, I may have done that. I don't remember it, but, you know, I'm a human being like anybody else, and I suppose if you were - you know, you can't say consistently, but I can

tell you, for example, my answers, I never traded; I never did. I can tell you my general approach to how I conducted myself. When I went in the legislature, I said to myself, You know, everybody thinks politicians are crooks. They're all a bunch of crooks, they're all evil, they're all - I'm just going to conduct myself in a straightforward, honest manner, and maybe that'll help in terms of the image of the politician - that may be a little egotistical - and others would say, Hey, Vic's doing that; maybe I can do that too, and we'd kind of bring this process along. I suppose that's part of my disappointment of having served all these years.

CH You don't feel that you had that effect?

VA No, no, I don't think so. By that, I mean I don't think that we've improved the process, and it's a disappointment. I am pleased - you know, every once in a while - I just, as a matter of fact, looked at a letter today from someone that was very complimentary of my performance as a public servant, and we ought to have more like that. But, you know - and I'm, of course, proud of that, but I'm thinking to myself, Well, gosh, there's got to be more than one of us. Obviously, I'm not the only one that holds - you know, I'm not egotistical enough to say I'm the only - how can one honest guy do something down there that...

CH But do you feel that you made any contributions in the process?

VA Oh yeah.

CH I'm not thinking in terms of specific legislation on various projects and bills that came before it, but in terms of the actual process of the way business is run there. Do you feel

that even in a small degree you might have made a contribution in that regard?

VA Not that I can observe. And remember I said I had gotten cynical about the process, and my cynicism really hasn't gone away, because I watch all of these things, and the standards that I think ought to be applied aren't being applied, and I watch all these games going on. I can read between the lines, I've been there, I know what's going on; maybe not the precise words or language or exactly how it took place, but I know. When we talked about the Jolin affair, I have to put myself in the Republican caucus, and what are we going to do about this. Well, okay, we'll kind of go along with it. Good judgment, good common sense would say to you, Hey, no, she's a convicted felon. We should stand up and say no and take the heat for this is a Republican thing, partisan Republican thing. So, you know, I'm kind of inside of this. I get that sense. But anyway, I would say to you that if I wrapped it all up into one bundle, I'm satisfied that being there had some salutary effect. Some of it would be very, very subtle; no one would ever notice. By that, I mean an amendment that changes the direction of something, being against something rather vocally that weakened it. There are instances that - I think we may have mentioned when we got into the matter of drugs, and when the bill finally got on the floor of the senate I stood up and said - you know, it looked like one of those ho-hummers - Whoa, wait a minute, fellows - because I had a sense of what was within the body - you may want to vote for this, but I don't. Do you know what's in here? And the bill actually - I think it went back to committee and never saw the light of day. Had I not said that, I'll bet you anything the darn thing would have passed. It had already passed the house. So, you know, there's times like that.

[End of Tape 22, Side 1]