

A VISIT



with **BARBARA**
ANDERSON

Barbara Anderson has the reflexes of a skilled debater. Her mind is quick, her speech is quick, and you can see her, ever alert, sensing the direction of words as they come at her. You get the idea that she brings a contentiousness to everything she does — if the suggestion is tuna salad for lunch she might go on the offensive. *Why tuna salad? Why not chicken salad?* Naturally, in interviews with reporters she is on guard, ready for the challenging query, making instinctual judgments halfway through a question about whether to parry or to counterpunch.

So I was surprised when she had a subdued, almost wounded, response to a question I put to her as we sat in the living room of her small, cluttered Marblehead home on a recent afternoon. The question had to do with something I'd heard a few weeks earlier. Anderson had called Christopher Lydon's radio talk show on WBUR-FM in Boston to offer comments on the topic of the day: What should be done to reform the Massachusetts legislature? She spoke then in measured and efficient sentences about the need to get the legislature out of the grip of a select few powerful officials, about ways to turn the body into a "citizen legislature" by cutting legislators' pay and making the sessions shorter.

Later in the show, a caller said, "I find myself agreeing with Barbara Anderson." He seemed surprised by his own admission. "I used to think she was a kook," he continued. "But I've been here for 10 years and I've seen a lot."

I asked Anderson, "What about that comment — 'I used to think she was a

kook'? Where does that come from?"

She said she hadn't any idea. There was an uncomfortable pause.

"Is that something you've heard before, that people see you that way?"

No, she hadn't heard that.

She thought for another moment. "I hear people say 'I used to disagree with you...'" she began. "People say 'You were right.' I've heard that."

But the kook comment, no. "I haven't heard that one much."

Then she recovered her footing. "That doesn't mean I'm *not* one," she offered.

In her early days as a leader of the Massachusetts tax revolt, Anderson was sometimes described in the press as an angry-housewife-turned-activist. She would be the first to take issue with the "housewife" part. She recalls complaints from her young son that he would too often come home to find initiative petitions instead of a meal on the dinner table. She tells of a deficit in sewing skills that led her to apply his Boy Scout badges onto his uniform with Superglue.

Now that her son is grown and her second husband has moved on, the Marblehead home is her own domain. Like the downtown office of Citizens for Limited Taxation, which I had visited a week earlier, Anderson's living room has a functional un-tidiness. There is plenty of printed matter on hand, and cursory inspection suggests a range of interests. Within arm's reach of the sofa was a recent copy of *The Limbaugh Letter*, as well as *The Celestial Observer*. There were pulp fiction paperbacks on the coffee table,

At home with
the state's
leading anti-
tax activist.

BY DAVE DENISON

along with a weighty Thomas Sowell disquisition. The place had an abundance of stuffed animals (of the teddy bear, not taxidermy variety), which Anderson explained by noting she was a chronic collector.

We had spoken in her office mostly about tax policy and government spending. Like most people in Massachusetts, I was familiar with Anderson's public persona — how she emerged in the early 1980s as a tenacious defender of Proposition 2½, which capped the growth of property taxes, how she led the fight in the late '80s to roll back state spending, a cause that was lost, and how she rallied two years ago against the ill-fated referendum to make the state income tax use graduated rates. I knew Anderson, too, as a regular part of the talk radio subculture. But in all of this there seemed to be only one side of Barbara Anderson on display — the debater, the rhetorician, the ideological pugilist. What was she like as a conversationalist?

She met me at the door wearing a pair of navy blue sweatpants, torn at the knee, and a heavy sweater. She was recovering from a bout over the weekend with the flu, and yet she looked more impressive than she had the week before. She is tall and her rust-red hair seems to go with her reputation for fieryness. We got to talking about her son, Lance, who grew up in this wood shingled house that Anderson and her former husband, Ralph Anderson, bought in 1975 for \$34,000.

Lance is now 31 and, having been advised by his mother during the waning days of the Dukakis administration

to look for work in a state that was not going down the tubes, is living in Nevada. He works as a juvenile probation officer. I had expected to hear that the son of such a strong-minded mother would share the same political views, but Anderson confided that her only son voted for Bill Clinton, apparently out of environmentalist sympathies. She seemed not to be surprised. There were many long telephone conversations during Lance's days at U-Mass in which she was hearing his

views about El Salvador and, she says, "running-dog capitalists." Though she suspects that politics is something her son dislikes from having seen and heard a bit too much of it while growing up, Anderson says Lance has no trouble holding his own in an argument with his mother. "He is so good as a debater," she said.

As the conversation drifted back to politics, I was thinking about what others had told me about Barbara Anderson's style of debate. Quite often, those who have found themselves in public debates with Anderson have walked away frustrated. She has a maddening habit, according to her detractors, of bending the facts to fit her argument. Laura Barrett, who researches fiscal policy for an arm of the Tax Equity Alliance of Massachusetts, the liberal counterpart to Anderson's group, recalls a debate in which Anderson insisted wealthy taxpayers would pay more, not less, under a federal flat tax. No facts or figures she offered would cause Anderson to budge, Barrett said.

But the other danger in a debate with Anderson is that she is a skilled simplifier. "One of the first things I heard when I came to this state," says Jim Braude, who took the job of leading TEAM in 1987, "and I still think it's one of the best descriptions of Barbara Anderson that anyone's ever given me, is that her brilliance is an ability to bring everything down to the barbershop level."

Braude also takes a softer line than most liberals on Anderson's relationship to the truth. "She is one of the least deceitful people I have come across, despite the fact that there are times when untruths cross her lips," Braude says.

One thing that usually works to Anderson's advantage in argumentation is that there is nothing careful about her political speech. When I asked her why she didn't favor doing away with the property tax entirely, since it's not a particularly good tax, she said, "No tax is a good tax to have." Later, she went even further, saying, "all the government's money is basically stolen money."

I took these as comments made for talk radio, but since we were not on the radio I tried to see if she really believed such statements. "If you say 'No tax is a good tax to have,' then you're saying you can't have government," I protested.



JIM THOMAS

Look out, Massachusetts: At the downtown Boston office of Citizens for Limited Taxation, Anderson has been learning to use a computer.

"Right," she said, "So therefore we're not saying that." Whereupon, she told of a discussion she had several years ago with Congressman John Olver, who was then in the state senate. "We'd been talking about different kinds of taxes. He was always intellectually interesting on this subject," she said. Olver, she recalled, pointed out that since every type of tax hurts somebody, the best thing you can do is have a wide mix of taxes, so the burden is spread out. "And that always seemed to me to be sensible," she said. So, no, she would not like to see the property tax abolished.

But how can it be that all government's money is "stolen money"? Haven't the people in this state consented, in a fairly democratic way, to a level of property taxation that doesn't increase by more than 2.5 percent a year? She conceded the point, but elaborated, "Stealing is taking money from someone. They're stealing it from the minority who say no."

Some conclude from such statements that Barbara

Anderson does not believe in government, I told her. "Whether someone is pro-government or anti-government is irrelevant," she said. "The fact is, the reality is, there's going to be government. There has to be, because if there weren't there'd be a vacuum that would be filled by something much worse than government — which would also become a type of government, whether it would be the Mafia, or whatever it would be."

"Everything is trade-offs," she said, referring to Thomas Sowell's argument in *A Conflict of Visions* that while liberals tend to believe in the perfectability of society, conservatives have a better understanding of the trade-offs and compromises necessary to make society work.

Anderson's public role seldom takes her into the discussion of gray areas and toward the acknowledgment of the complexity of public policy ques-

"She's one of the least deceitful people I've come across," says friend and archrival Jim Braude.

tions. Yet some who opposed her in the fight over Proposition 2½ and then worked with her to make the law effective, came to see another side of Barbara Anderson. "I learned to respect her a lot, but also to like her a lot," said James Segal, a former Brookline legislator who was a leading opponent of the tax limitation law. "She has a sense of humor, she was tireless in working on Proposition 2½, and she has integrity of her position, which is rare." He admits, also, that "sometimes she could be very exasperating to deal with, because she didn't accept the need for [public] services."

Readers of Anderson's twice-monthly column in the Quincy *Patriot-Ledger* also see her less strident, sometimes whimsical side. A while ago she wrote a column explaining her love for Mickey Mouse, beginning, "If someone asked my one true love if he's a man or a mouse, he'd have to admit he's a mouse." Anderson, who worked on a student newspaper at the tiny DuBois campus of Pennsylvania State University, confides that she enjoys writing the newspaper column more than any other work she does.

From the point of view of the state's liberal establishment, there is little question that Anderson is a political force who is willing to push for change that risks serious damage to the public sector. The power of liberals and big business teamed up to defeat the CLT push in 1990 to cut nearly a billion dollars out of the state budget, a proposition that Braude's bumper sticker brigade famously said "Goes Too Far."

And though by early summer it appeared that Anderson's coalition of anti-taxers, term limiters, and "Throw the Bums Out" activists might not get a chance this November to cut the pay of state legislators and force half-year sessions (their proposed ballot initiative was tied up in court), there is no shortage of sweeping measures that Anderson envisions as part of the continuing assault on the status quo.

"One of our goals is, we don't want the property tax used to pay for education," she said. The 1993 education reform law, which among other things attempted to equalize the spending of rich and poor school districts, is not, in her view a real reform. "We're trying to get enough local aid over a long period of time to effectively cover the entire education budget," she said. "It's confusing for us,

Anderson
cites *The
Aquarian
Conspiracy's*
ideal of "gov-
ernments in
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for continuous
renewal."

because we don't like the present educational system. We don't want to put more money into it at all until we release the power of the teachers' union over the system itself." But ultimately she would like to see "a system of vouchers funded by state broad-based taxes — the existing ones, of course, no tax increases — that will be given to each parent. That is true equalization. Every parent gets the same amount of money to spend on any school they want. That's our ultimate goal."

When Anderson gets going on Big Themes, her thinking tends to travel the globe and span epochs. "Have you read *The Aquarian Conspiracy* by Marilyn Ferguson?" she asked me, in the middle of a discourse that began with modern-day New Zealand and ended with Ancient Greece. The bottom-up democratic revolution that began in Greece and continues today as governments are brought under control is explained in Ferguson's book, which Anderson described in a column last year as a "responsible guide to the New Age."

"Ferguson preaches government from the bottom up instead of the top down," Anderson wrote. "The form of her 'conspiracy' is 'small groups of friends and coalitions of such groups' working for 'governments in which healthy unrest would make for continuous renewal, in which freedoms would be continually expanded and extended.' The year her book was published," Anderson noted, "Aquarian Ronald Reagan became president, and in Massachusetts, Proposition 2½ was initiated by a small group of friends."

All of which brings to mind Anderson's answer to an interviewer several years ago, who asked, "Are you a libertarian?" She said, "No, I'm an Aquarian, with Libra rising."

The Age of Aquarius notwithstanding, I detected in my conversations with Anderson that it is the language of libertarianism that she is most comfortable with — "my personal bottom line is freedom," she said, "it's more important than anything" — but she claimed her thinking is changing of late. When I asked if she distrusts the conservative wing of the Republican Party that pushes social and cultural issues, she said, "No that doesn't bother me all that much. It used to. I used to be more the libertarian Republican that Bill Weld is. But as the years go by, maybe

as I get older, I'm beginning to see the law of unintended results. And to see that maybe they had a point about some of this."

They?

"The more traditional conservatives. I can't bring myself to support their agenda or vote for it. But I can understand, the way I couldn't before, what they're trying to say, and how there has been a general undermining of social responsibility — a lot of it because of things that on individual items I support."

"I mean," she continued, "I'm very much, obviously, pro-divorce when you feel like it, because I've been divorced twice. And I certainly don't want the government coming in and telling me that I couldn't get divorced whenever I felt like it — it's none of their business. Nor would I have changed my life in any way. But I can see the point they're making, about the lack of stability in children's lives now. I got lucky with my son. But I do think I got lucky."

"They haven't got you going to church yet, have they?" I asked.

She laughed. "No, but I can see the value of it." She spoke of possibilities of "working in coalition" with conservative religious groups. Perhaps, I thought later, such groups would be excited about Anderson's goal of giving parents individual vouchers to pay for schools of their own choice.

Mixed in with Anderson's at-a-distance regard for social conservatives is an ambivalence about the power of business elites. Her group has been a close ally of the Massachusetts High Technology Council and can often be counted on to support, or at least not oppose, the agenda of large corporations, such as the recent tax break that the Raytheon Co. won from the legislature, or the cut in the capital gains tax that the Weld administration bargained for.

Yet Anderson knows that many in the traditional business establishment see her as an uncouth guest in the halls of power. "It's been my experience with big business in this state that's turned me into a populist," she said. She lumps big business with big government and big unions as an unholy trinity that can be counted on to preserve their relationships in a regulated but all-too-cozy system. "Most of the big business community wouldn't know free enterprise if they found it in their salad," she said.

And there is something else about business elites that bothers her: She distrusts their moderation. She wants no part of a politics that rests on "the liberal vision that we can all hold hands and love each other. This is not the way the world is."

Jim Braude had told me earlier that it was this contentious attitude that he most admired in Anderson, though he opposes just about everything she works for politically. For Braude and Anderson, politics is inevitably about The Fight. And as a fighter, Anderson is "at the head of her class," he said. "I've rarely seen anyone as good and as relentless."

"Blessed are the peacemakers," Anderson said, dismissively. "I don't buy that. It's always going to be adversarial. And so you have to hold your own on what is a battlefield."

The day after I interviewed Anderson in Marblehead I was in the car at the time when she normally makes her weekly appearance on the Jerry Williams talk show on WRKO-AM. Still feeling the effects of the flu, she was spending the day at home, and Williams had called in sick, as well. The substitute hosts were working themselves up about the unfairness of the income tax and the immorality of government schemes to redistribute wealth. "Let's get Barbara on the line," one of them said.

Soon Barbara Anderson's voice was coming over the radio, and the host asked her whether the income tax should be abolished. Anderson quoted Oliver Wendell Holmes that "taxes are the price you pay for civilization." This being talk radio, she then questioned whether we have civilization, and if not, whether we are getting a lousy bargain. Take a look at the latest outrage in the legislature, she said, moving efficiently to the subject of a bill quietly passed in the previous week that increased the state pension benefits for those who had served in the military, thus padding the retirement pay of the just-resigned Speaker of the House Charlie Flaherty. Flaherty, an admitted tax felon! This is the way Beacon Hill treats our tax dollars...etc. etc.

What I knew from my visit with Barbara Anderson is that she could not be counted on to favor eliminating the income tax because she believes a broad mix of taxes spreads out the burden. But that wasn't good material for the radio show. That was yesterday's philosophical conversation. Today, the fight was on. ■



JIM THOMAS