

Topics

Have It Their Way

Marital Disclosure

The Court of Appeals has upheld the constitutionality of New York City's local law requiring full financial disclosure by all city officials earning more than \$25,000 a year. Although disclosure laws are a modern innovation, the city law reflects a somewhat antique view of the relations between husbands and wives. The officeholder covered by the law must reveal not only his or her assets but also the assets of the spouse. Have you or has your spouse a safe deposit box? the form asks. Where is it? What, in effect, is in it?

In the days when officeholders' spouses were invariably wives, and wives swore obedience in the course of adopting that status, officeholders could fairly be held accountable. An official could simply demand of his wife whether she had a safe deposit box somewhere and what was in it. But what does today's officeholder do when his or her spouse refuses to answer?

Royal Foibles

They are picking on Britain's Royal Family again—Princess Margaret, to be precise. It seems that the Princess's public life—consorting with “night-club operators and minor tax-exiles” instead of with her proper entourage—has upset those who take the monarchy seriously. Those who do not take it seriously, and in fact would

prefer not to have to take it at all, are ready as ever to dump the Princess from the civil list which pays her more than \$100,000 a year. “In human terms, it is possible to feel sympathy for Princess Margaret,” says the good gray socialist *New Statesman*, playing Uriah Heep, “but humanity is not what monarchy is about.”

We're not so sure. The parallel may not be exact, but Americans are evidently fascinated by the foibles of their First Family and its entourage—and the more foibles the better. What else puts Brother Billy's name on beer cans, sister Ruth's on magazine covers and Hamilton Jordan's in the gossip columns? If Princess Margaret should weary of being picked on at home, let her come here. Whatever oddity some in England see, well, to paraphrase the Gravedigger in “Hamlet,” “Twill not be seen in her here. Here many are as odd as she.”

Automatic

Generation gaps are defined in small ways, such as whether one grows up with Automats or Burger Kings. But more than the passage of time, there is a cultural gap as well—differences in life styles and standards that historians might ponder for clues to some of the trivia of 20th-century civilization.

There is a link between the Automat and Burger King; Horn and Hardart, the inventor of the Automat, is now a franchisee for Burger King and is

phasing out its nickel-nostalgia for the more profitable, packaged fast food. The mass-produced hamburger is more to the taste (if one can use the word) of today's generation than homey dishes dispensed from little framed glass cells for a handful of nickels, dimes and quarters.

Also more to today's taste, apparently, is the plastic décor that goes with the cardboard containers. Anyone with a long-enough memory of the corner of Broadway and 46th Street can recall a nobly proportioned room with an ornate high ceiling and wooden tables and chairs, surrounded by a glittering dado of trap doors. The room's shape is the same today, but it is sheathed with a sort of barn-door siding and decorated with lit-plastic signs.

Burger King's production-line hamburger achieves real automation, on a national scale. The Automat's “technology” was all illusion; there were very human hands behind those trap doors. The Automat not only failed to introduce the world of the future; the world of the future is never what anyone thinks it is. When it comes, it is far more banal.

But dreams of technology don't die, they go to the Smithsonian — where a real Automat has been installed for the nostalgia of one generation and the edification of others, with sealed change slots and plastic lemon meringue pie. This gives the memories of New Yorkers authentic cultural immortality. Only nickels and dimes are obsolete.