

# Government

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Tuesday, January 16, 2007

**Editorial from Orange County Register**

## **Punishment for the Piecemakers**

Zeal with which the Costa Mesa group was prosecuted was out of proportion to their crime.

As the Dickens character put it, sometimes “the law is an ass.” Many Americans understand that point, which is one reason that Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday was celebrated Monday. King and other leaders of the civil rights movement challenged the laws — unjust, discriminatory and foolish ones. They often did so by breaking them.

Perhaps laws that allow government inspectors to regulate, raid and even shut down food-service businesses aren’t as noxious as laws that relegate members of certain races to second-class status, but they can still be noxious and oppressive. Just because something is a law — even if the law is supported by most people — doesn’t mean that it is necessarily just, or that it is applied fairly or sensibly.

On Friday, Orange County Superior Court Judge Kelly MacEachern sentenced 85-year-old Marie Kolasinski to 10 days in jail and three years’ probation for an act of civil disobedience. She and two other members of a religious group called the Piecemakers received sentences for defying the county’s restaurant inspectors. They must also pay fines and nearly \$10,000 in compensation to county health officials.

The group of about 26 people live communally in Costa Mesa and run a well-kept country store that sells quilts and gifts and also sandwiches and soups in an adjacent tea room. The county demanded the right to inspect the tea room, and inspectors were met by group members who barred their entrance to the kitchen. The county insists that the group has the right only to sell prepackaged food, and has successfully gone to court to stop the Piecemakers from running an unauthorized restaurant.

Piecemakers Country Store customers have not complained about the quality of food they have received there. Most restaurants provide decent and safe food to customers because it’s in their best interest to do so: Nitpicking inspections from government bureaucrats are not the reason for safe food preparation and storage at most places. No one was hurt, no one was complaining here. The obvious reason for the legal action is that the Piecemakers defied the government authorities, and those authorities were not about to let it go.

*Piecemakers Country Store*

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This simmering dispute between the admittedly quirky and occasionally foul-mouthed elderly Piecemakers and the government has gone back years. Some of the disputes take on a Monty Python quality. The Register reports that in 1997 the city of Costa Mesa filed a criminal charge against one Piecemaker for — get this — performing a musical without a permit, and a dozen Piecemakers sang “When the Saints Go Marching In” at her arraignment. At another point, the city demanded that the Piecemakers revamp their broom closet.

This matter shows that even well-intentioned health and safety laws ultimately rest on police-state force. A person can do as the authorities say or face armed agents of the government who will force them to do so. That’s why free societies should have fewer laws and regulations, no matter the goals of those who propose them.

You’ve got to wonder about the sense of proportion when the county district attorney puts forth this much effort to jail elderly religious people for the crime of illegally baking muffins and selling sandwiches to happy customers. Or when cities prosecute people for having illegal musicals and improperly maintaining their broom closets.

Yes, yes, the law is the law. But sometimes the law is asinine. And sometimes it takes an act of civil disobedience to remind us of that fact.