Editorial

Benefit activities, not benefit fund

John A. Currie '57, director of finance, announced last week that organizations which employ students must contribute an amount equal to 33.9 percent of their payroll to MIT's employee benefit program. An agreement MIT made with the federal government requires the Institute to make these contributions, he said.

The MIT benefit program funds, among other things, the pensions, and health insurance of Institute employees. The students for whom these contributions must be made will see nary a penny of the bounty. Student activities would be put in the position of financing MIT, a serious perversion of roles.

Student groups simply cannot generate 33.9 percent more payroll money. The Student Center Committee coffeehouse would presumably have to raise its prices, the Lecture Series would have to raise its prices, the Lecture Series committee's movie admissions, The Tech its advertising rates and typesetting fees, and so on. If they must pay the benefits for Institute employees, they will surely pass the cost along to their primary consumers, the financially beleaguered MIT students.

The requirement also represents an unfair additional burden on student organizations already plagued by declining membership and reduced participation of members. The administration has repeatedly averred that student activities are a central aspect for enriching the student experience. MIT should put its money where its mouth is. President Paul E. Gray '54 is the only person, Currie says, who can exempt student activities from having to subsidize Institute employees. If that be so, Gray must act to preserve and maintain student activities at MIT.

Defining limit of popular will

In a barbaric society, the rights of the majority are unlimited: A majority can always force a minority to do anything it wants. Fortunately, we live in a civilized society, in which both the majority and minority have legally defined rights and powers. Unfortunately, the extent of those rights and powers is not well defined.

To what extent may a majority inflict its will on a minority? If it is a minority of one against the majority of a mob seizing its property, then clearly the majority is in the wrong and it is an act of stealing. When the minority is a company, and the majority is a nation nationalizing an industry, the distinctions are not as clear.

When a majority says a minority may not engage in some profitable pursuit like genetic engineering, or take a government contract to design nuclear warheads, because of a moral question on the nature of the project, the issue explodes into a mass conflict.

It is very easy to develop an elitist attitude that only the informed, the expert, should make decisions on important issues. Experts must be trusted to make decisions on concrete, scientific questions — can you imagine NASA conducting a public opinion poll to determine how much shielding the space shuttle requires? In the arenas of economic and social policy, on the other hand, an "expert" is one who agrees with your point of view.

Inherent in the republican form of government practiced in the United States is a great respect for the will of the people. After all, it is the people who elect their representatives to make the laws of the land, and the people who legitimize a government "of the people." Is it for this fundamental reason that the United States government is legitimate, and that of the Soviet Union is not?

It is not always possible to know what "the people" want. Rarely, if ever, can you imagine NASA conducting a public opinion poll to determine how many workers it would accept to make the space shuttle.

Fortunately, we live in a civilized society where the right to vote to seize the property of the wealthiest man in the town would be both illegal and wrong. The question should never be put to a vote.

The courts should perform the screening function, but they, too, are comprised of people fallible who can also make mistakes. The people must, then, limit their own power. Voters must consider whether a particular action is within their power, and then they must ponder whether it is morally correct to act.