

Rates vote a danger, — MP claims

By Geoffrey Browning

Government proposals to extend referendums to local government finance were described yesterday as a constitutional monstrosity by Mr Terence Higgins, MP for Worthing and a former Conservative Treasury Minister.

Mr Higgins who was a Minister of State and Financial Secretary to the Treasury in the Heath administration, said the proposals in the Green Paper published on Wednesday were unnecessary and dangerous.

"Far from being democratic, it strikes at the basis of our representative system of democracy", he said.

The document released by the Department of the Environment, envisaged that councils wishing to hold a referendum to gain support for a supplementary rate to cover excessive spending, would have to ask a standard question laid down by Parliament.

Mr Higgins is the second former minister appointed by Mr Heath to criticize government policy this week. Mr Geoffrey Rippon, former Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster also condemned Mrs Thatcher's monetary policies.

Mr Higgins acknowledged it was essential to curtail excessive local government expenditure but rejected referendums as a means of cutting public borrowing and controlling the money supply.

Instead, he suggested the Government should tackle the difficulty by speeding up abolition of the domestic rating system

Particular difficulties and dangers would arise if the referendum principle was extended to taxation. It would be surprising if people voted in favour of higher rates or taxes but they were likely to vote in favour of better public services.

THE TIMES

FRIDAY 2nd

OCTOBER

1981

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