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A dance that worries

THE controversy over property rates has taken a new turn.

Three days ago the Urban Council appeared to have made a swift move to soothe public anxiety over the issue. In a statement at the Urbco meeting last Tuesday, Chairman A. de O. Sales put forward a sliding scale formula — reduce the Urbco's share of the property rates from the present six per cent to four per cent in the coming financial year and then raise it at the rate of one percentage point annually to bring it back to six per cent.

While the real purpose of this two steps backward and two steps forward exercise itself is to be questioned, the chairman is now accused by some of his fellow members of violating the regulations governing the Urbco and trying to move a step ahead of all others in a "desire to take credit for the decision".

Whatever the motive behind Mr Sales' utterance, and whatever the legal status of what he said last Tuesday, the comments Mrs Elsie Elliott and Dr Denny Huang made yesterday made one thing clear: The Urbco members are yet to settle their squabble over the rate issue and the public at large, therefore, has no reason — at least until next Tuesday's Urbco meeting — to be any less anxious over the issue than they were last week. And whether Tuesday will mark an end to public anxiety remains uncertain.

Meanwhile, it must be said that Mr Sales' rate cut proposal makes little meaning. While his two steps backward and two steps forward formula has the flare of a flamenco dancer, it accomplishes very little in breathing space gained for the public. For while at first it may appear attractive, the public knees are bound to feel the weight of this exercise by April 1979. Whether this weight needs to be used to force the public on their knees is questionable.

As we pointed out in this column last Tuesday if the Government and the Urbco are to maintain their share of the property rate at the present two to one ratio, the Urbco should reduce its portion of the rates to 3.75 per cent. And even after such a reduction, the Urbco's revenue from property tax would rise by at least 12 per cent. Whether such an increase in revenue is justifiable in view of the more than \$100 million surplus the Urbco has accumulated since it obtained financial independence from the Government remains to be explained.

And until such explanation is forthcoming, we see no reason to applaud the flamenco dance.