

A letter from John Christopher Burton, socialist candidate in California, to “Tonight Show” host Jay Leno

23 August 2003

Below we are publishing the response of John Christopher Burton, the candidate in the California recall election endorsed by the Socialist Equality Party, to an invitation from Jay Leno to appear in the audience of The Tonight Show. The invitation, which was received by Burton on August 18, was extended to all 135 candidates in the recall election. Having requested their presence on Monday, September 22, the letter informed the recipients that The Tonight Show was “not offering this as a platform to speak.” Rather, the letter stated, “Jay will be recognizing you as a group.”

Dear Mr. Leno,

I received an invitation to attend a taping of your television program, “The Tonight Show.” I hereby decline to attend this event because, whatever your personal intentions, the manner in which you propose to present me and other candidates in the California recall election demonstrates an unserious attitude towards the election. It is dismissive of the dozens of ordinary people who are running in an election from which, due to California’s notoriously restrictive election laws, they would under normal circumstances be barred.

In your invitation, which was sent to all candidates in the recall election, you make a point of informing the recipients that they will not be given a platform to speak. Instead, they will be recognized by you “as a group.”

Clearly, your invitation is not for the purpose of providing candidates with a forum for the serious presentation of their views or encouraging genuine political discussion. Instead, it is meant to provide yet another opportunity for the media to depict the election as a “circus” because of the unusual number of

candidates on the ballot, and to discount the majority of candidates, suggesting they are either eccentric or are running to seek publicity.

While the format of your program will treat the ordinary citizens seeking to take part in political life as little more than objects of amusement, you adopted an altogether different attitude toward Arnold Schwarzenegger. You invited this man, who has no qualifications to hold high public office, to use your show as the venue for announcing his candidacy.

Schwarzenegger is a body builder-turned film actor and real estate speculator whose central role in the recall is to lend a celebrity gloss to the right-wing effort to unseat the sitting governor, Gray Davis. His fame comes from films that, in general, glorify violence and backwardness. He has no political program through which to solve the budget crisis, evinces no understanding of the pressing social and economic concerns facing millions of ordinary Californians, and has little knowledge of the political process as a whole.

In comparison to Schwarzenegger, my own professional background makes me a far more substantial candidate. Having served as a civil rights attorney for 25 years, I have a deep understanding of the problems and needs of the people of California, and intimate knowledge of the political and legal system. I have fought against police brutality and discrimination in numerous critical cases in California. I am sure that there are other candidates with similarly relevant experience.

The decision to give Schwarzenegger a platform from which to speak while relegating all others to the status of mere onlookers has nothing to do with the relative political merits of the candidates. It has everything to do with creating obstacles to a serious discussion of

political issues.

I will not participate in anything that detracts from the gravity of the political questions facing the people of California and the country as a whole.

Sincerely yours,

John Christopher Burton

August 21, 2003



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