

Recall debate in LA: Green candidate Camejo praises Democrat Bustamante

Shannon Jones
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On September 9, California Lt. Governor Cruz Bustamante, liberal columnist Arianna Huffington and Green Party candidate Peter Camejo participated in a debate on the California special recall election jointly sponsored by New California Media and the Greenlining Institute.

The recall election, set for October 7, will involve two questions. Those who go to the polls will vote first on whether or not to recall Governor Gray Davis, and second on his replacement should the recall succeed.

The Republican candidates to replace Davis did not attend the debate, held in downtown Los Angeles. Former US Olympic Committee chairman Peter Ueberroth announced the same day that he was dropping out of the race. State Senator Tom McClintock, the main representative of the Republican right, canceled at the last minute, citing a conflict in his schedule. Bodybuilder-turned-actor Arnold Schwarzenegger has refused all debates except one set for September 24, where the questions will be submitted to the candidates in advance.

The Greenlining Institute and New California Media are nonprofit advocacy groups for minority small businessmen and professionals. The candidates were questioned by a panel of journalists selected from electronic and print media that are oriented to ethnic minorities—African-Americans, Spanish-speaking immigrants, Asians and Arab-Americans. Given the venue, McClintock's decision to skip the debate is understandable. The right-wing Republican has made attacks on immigrants a central theme in his campaign, scapegoating undocumented workers for most of California's problems.

The most striking aspect of the debate was the superficiality of the differences that separate Camejo and Huffington from Bustamante—something which Camejo, in particular, made no effort to conceal.

In the course of the debate, Bustamante continued his tactic of using populist language to appeal to working class and minority voters. Bustamante's "left" face made it all the more difficult for Camejo and Huffington to conceal their lack of a principled and fundamental opposition to the Democratic Party.

Bustamante repeated his denunciation of the energy companies as "terrorists" and called for re-regulation of the industry and higher taxes on corporations. He continued to distance himself from Governor Davis, joining the other

candidates in criticizing as insensitive to immigrants a remark by Davis, widely publicized by the media, mocking Arnold Schwarzenegger's Austrian accent.

The conversion of Bustamante from a conservative Democrat to a populist has been rather sudden. During his years in the California state legislature, he was regarded as a friend of agribusiness interests in his central California district.

On the question of the recall, Bustamante was once again silent, making no reference to his campaign's official call for a "no" vote. Meanwhile, Camejo and Huffington held to their position of supporting the recall. Thus, on this very basic question of democratic principle, all demonstrated their indifference to the attempt of a few right-wing multi-millionaires to overturn an election.

Camejo went out of his way to ingratiate himself with Bustamante, who is currently leading in most opinion polls. He declared his agreement with the lieutenant governor on a number of issues, including plans for coastal regulation and legislation mandating a limited extension of health coverage for workers. Camejo also sided with Bustamante in the controversy over some \$4 million in donations the Democrat received from Indian tribes.

At the same time, the Green candidate played down or ignored points of difference between the Green Party platform and right-wing positions held by Bustamante, such as the Democrat's support for the death penalty. At one point Camejo said of Bustamante, "It is possible I could try to work with him."

His friendly attitude toward Bustamante prompted a reporter at a press conference following the debate to ask Camejo if he planned to withdraw in favor of the lieutenant governor. The question evoked only a half-hearted denial from the Green candidate.

The fact that Camejo is an enthusiastic supporter of the recall drive and has joined the Republican right in demonizing Davis, while simultaneously adapting himself to Bustamante, underscores an important political fact: support for the recall has nothing in common with a principled opposition to the Democratic Party.

In the case of Camejo and the Greens, support for the recall reflects indifference to the threat to democratic rights from the

extreme right, combined with electoral opportunism. Camejo's performance at the debate, which was in line with the general tenor of his campaign, made it clear that he and his Green Party supporters saw the right-wing operation against Davis as an opportunity to gain political influence and project the Greens as a "responsible" third party. Their overriding concern in the special election is to establish their respectability and legitimacy in the eyes of the media and bourgeois public opinion.

The American Greens aspire to the electoral success of their counterparts in Europe, particularly Germany. As in the case of the German Greens, who have unceremoniously dumped such supposedly core principles as anti-militarism and opposition to nuclear power in exchange for cabinet posts and other trappings of power, Camejo and company will have no difficulty tailoring their policies to the dictates of short-term political expediency. In other words, they will move further to the right.

This opportunistic course is expressed most clearly in Camejo's continued silence on Iraq. At the Los Angeles event, as in the September 3 televised debate, he did not once mention the war. Camejo's only allusion to Iraq implicitly legitimized one of the main lies advanced by the Bush administration to justify the war—that Iraq had a hand in the September 11, 2001 tragedy. In response to a question about the anti-democratic USA Patriot Act, Camejo implied a connection between Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and the deposed Iraqi regime. He declared that "what created conditions for terrorism were the policies of support for Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, and the selling of weapons to Saddam Hussein."

When, following the debate, a reporter from the *World Socialist Web Site* asked Camejo if he favored withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, the Green candidate said he favored a United Nations, rather than US, occupation of the Persian Gulf state. Thus he revealed that he has no principled opposition to the imperialist occupation of Iraq. He only proposes that it be conducted under the flag of the UN, which backed the first Gulf War and more than a decade of brutal sanctions. His call for a UN occupation echoes the position of Washington's imperialist rivals in Europe, particularly France and Germany.

Likewise, Bustamante said nothing about Iraq. When asked by the WSWS at a press conference afterwards about Bush's request for an additional \$87 billion to finance the Iraq occupation, the lieutenant governor declared his agreement, in the name of "supporting our servicemen abroad." He then, like many Democratic politicians, tried to distance himself from Bush, adding, "But I think we went there under false pretenses, we should try to resolve the situation we created there and then withdraw."

On budget and tax policy Camejo, the former Socialist Workers Party presidential candidate, barely distinguished his position from that of Bustamante. In some respects, he presented himself as more conservative. He repeated his call for "fiscal responsibility," echoing the familiar right-wing mantra.

Similarly, he criticized the Davis administration for "not being careful about the way money has been spent." He avoided any talk of making inroads against wealth and privilege, limiting himself to the demand that the rich pay the same percentage of their income in taxes as working people.

To call this demand reformist is a stretch, since it implicitly rejects what was long a standard plank in liberal reform politics—that tax policy should be structured so as to redistribute the wealth, at least to some degree, downwards, and, accordingly, the wealthy should be taxed at substantially higher rates than those with lower incomes.

In the debate, Huffington attempted to stake out a position to the left of Camejo and Bustamante. She denounced Bush's proposed increase in spending for the Iraq "quagmire," saying the money could be better used to help California. The remark drew loud and vigorous applause. However, she stopped short of calling for a US withdrawal.

Like the other candidates, Huffington proposed no serious attacks on entrenched corporate interests, merely repeating her vague call for ending tax loopholes. Further, she advanced the discredited policy of giving tax credits to businesses investing in urban and inner-city areas. The result of these proposals in Detroit and other major cities has been to further starve hard-pressed local governments of funds while offering up more oppressed sections of the working class as a cheap labor force.

The debate underscored the inability of the Democratic Party or liberal critics such as Camejo and Huffington to offer a serious answer to the attacks on jobs, living standards and democratic rights. Whether Davis remains in office or one of the so-called major replacement candidates succeeds him, the attacks on the working people of California will intensify.



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