

First debate in California recall election: Snapshot of a political system in crisis

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The first in a series of televised debates in the California gubernatorial recall election, held September 3, underscored the inability of any of the so-called major candidates to seriously address the economic and social crisis gripping the largest state in the US. The event, held in the East Bay city of Walnut Creek, was televised throughout the state, but its time slot—4 p.m. to 6 p.m.—guaranteed that large numbers of working people making their way home in rush-hour traffic would not have the opportunity to view it.

The recall election, set for October 7, will consist of two questions: first, whether the sitting governor, Democrat Gray Davis, should be removed from office and, second, which of 135 candidates on the ballot will replace Davis, in the event that a majority of those who go to the polls vote to remove him.

Wednesday's forum, jointly sponsored by Fox-affiliate KTVU News, KQED—a public broadcasting station in the Bay Area—and the *Contra Costa Times* newspaper, consisted of two parts. First came a 30-minute interview with Davis, which was followed by a 90-minute debate between five of the candidates who have qualified for ballot status in the replacement election. Participating in the debate were: Lt. Governor Cruz Bustamante, the most prominent Democrat on the ballot; Republicans Tom McClintock, a state senator and spokesman for the Republican right; and Peter Ueberroth, a millionaire businessman who chaired the 1984 US Olympics committee; Green Party candidate Peter Camejo; and Arianna Huffington, a liberal columnist who is running as an independent.

Arnold Schwarzenegger, the body builder-turned film actor who is backed by the majority of the Republican establishment in California and nationally, declined to appear. His campaign has announced that he will participate in only one debate, to be held on September 24. The broadcasting group sponsoring that forum has promised to supply the participants with the questions in advance.

The organizers of Wednesday's debate made no serious attempt to justify the exclusion of the vast majority of candidates, or suggest that the excluded candidates be provided an opportunity to debate and present their views before a statewide television audience. Nor did they seek to defend the criteria they used in inviting candidates to participate.

These criteria are, on their face, arbitrary. Invitations went to candidates who received at least 4 percent support in an opinion poll conducted last month by Field Research, or who received at least 4 percent of the popular vote in last November's election for governor. Leaving aside the dubious reliability of opinion polls in general, a survey conducted last month would have occurred when the various campaigns had barely gotten under way. The second criterion assured a place for Camejo, who received 5 percent of the vote as the Green Party's candidate in the November election.

In his interview with Dennis Richmond of KTVU News, Davis repeated his charge that the recall drive originated as an effort, launched by wealthy right-wing Republicans only weeks after last November's vote, to overturn his election for a second term as governor. As previously, Davis

linked this attempted constitutional coup with similar antidemocratic Republican operations, including the impeachment of Clinton and the electoral fraud in Florida that culminated in the installation of Bush in the White House by the right-wing majority on the US Supreme Court. Having thus pointed to a pattern of political provocations and conspiracies on a massive scale, Davis immediately belittled their significance, comparing them to the overturning of a victory by the Oakland Raiders football team.

When asked how he would respond to popular anger and frustration over cuts in health care and education, soaring energy costs and sharp increases in regressive taxes and user fees, Davis could only repeat that he had "gotten the message" and promise to "stay connected to the people" if he succeeded in defeating the recall drive. At the same time he hinted at further austerity measures, saying, "California needs spending restraint."

The ensuing debate between the five invited candidates in the replacement election was largely an exchange of sound bites and slogans, characterized overall by superficiality, a lack of historical or political analysis, and an effort to treat the crisis in California as an isolated phenomenon, unconnected to the broader crisis of American society, the global economy or the militaristic policies of the Bush administration. In the course of the 90-minute forum, there was not a single mention by any of the candidates—including Huffington and Camejo—of the war in Iraq. They proceeded as though the quagmire in the Middle East, which is costing hundreds of American lives and untold thousands of Iraqi lives and consuming tens of billions of dollars, had no bearing on the fiscal crisis of California, not to mention the 37 other state governments that are facing bankruptcy.

This political myopia was encouraged and fostered by the media groups that organized the debate. They structured the forum—with a one-minute time limit on answers to questions and 30-second rebuttals from the other candidates—in such a way as to preclude any serious discussion of the social and political crisis that has produced the first-ever gubernatorial recall election in the country's largest state. The net effect—by no means unintended—was to further mystify rather than clarify.

Nevertheless, the event did provide some insight into the gathering political crisis of the American two-party system that has erupted in the form of the recall election. The Democrat Bustamante, the independent Huffington and the Green candidate Camejo were all clearly conscious of the growth of oppositional sentiment within the working population that is increasingly directed against the established parties and the corporate elite. They sought to make an appeal to social layers being radicalized by the crisis and growing increasingly hostile to the right-wing consensus that has dominated American political life for a quarter of a century.

The Republicans—McClintock and Ueberroth—on the other hand, stood exposed as the unabashed defenders of wealth and privilege, whose demands for further attacks on social conditions placed them openly in the camp of a narrow and isolated political constituency.

In the opening question, which was addressed to McClintock, Dan

Borenstein, political editor of the *Contra Costa Times*, highlighted the lack of popular support for the policies of the Republican right and alluded to the antidemocratic character of the recall drive. Borenstein noted that in the course of his legislative career, McClintock had attacked his own party's candidate (former governor Pete Wilson) for backing taxes, had voted against banning assault weapons, against banning offshore drilling, against employment discrimination protection for people with AIDS and against abortion rights. Was it appropriate, he asked, that under the provisions of the recall law a "hard-core Republican" who is "more conservative than most Californians" could replace an elected governor on the basis of a small plurality.

In the course of his remarks, McClintock affirmed his commitment to further reducing taxes and regulations on business, boasted that he was the only candidate on the platform to have supported Proposition 187 (the 1994 ballot initiative, subsequently struck down by the courts, that barred so-called "illegal" aliens from receiving social benefits such as food stamps, health care and education), called for abolishing the Coastal Commission that regulates commercial development of the California coastline, attacked California's workers' compensation laws as overly generous, advocated the privatization and contracting out of state operations and the elimination of state workers' jobs, and demanded an end to "fraud" in the state's medical program for the poor, i.e., massive cuts in eligibility and benefits.

Ueberroth, for his part, struck a somewhat more moderate tone on issues such as abortion and gay rights, while sticking doggedly to the themes of fiscal austerity, slashing social programs and cutting taxes for big business and the wealthy. He repeatedly deplored the state's supposed "spending binge," insisting that "there is no money," and claimed that the root of all problems was a business-hostile environment that forced companies to move jobs out of the state. When asked about proposals to raise taxes on the rich as a means of balancing the state budget, he suppressed a smile, shrugged, and said, "Well, you know, taxing the rich ... I've made more money in California than I thought I would."

Both of the Republicans, in somewhat different ways, expressed the undiluted and maniacal striving of the ruling elite to increase its own personal wealth and intensify its exploitation of the working class, no matter what the cost to society at large.

Lt. Governor Bustamante sought to play off of the unabashed greed and reaction of his Republican rivals and cast himself as a friend and spokesman of the working man. This long-time Democratic Party functionary and member of the Davis administration has, evidently, had something of a political conversion. He declared, for example, that his past support for deregulation of the energy industry was a "mistake," and went so far as to denounce Enron and other energy giants for "acting like terrorists" and "holding up 34 million people" during the California energy crisis of 2000-2001. He attacked Wal-Mart for paying poverty wages, boasted of his humble origins and proclaimed his solidarity with immigrant workers.

At the same time he took care to invoke his establishment credentials, noting his role in welfare "reform," his support for the death penalty and his backing for the anti-tax Proposition 13.

Bustamante, the only candidate in the debate officially calling for a "no" vote on the recall of Davis, was notably silent on the issue during Wednesday's forum. He had nothing to say about the right-wing attempt to bring down his own governor.

For their part, both Huffington and Camejo are supporting the recall, in effect, blocking with the Republican right and helping disguise its antidemocratic maneuvers as a grass-roots expression of participatory democracy. Of all the participants in the forum, Huffington—the former partisan of the Republican right turned liberal critic and columnist—evinced the clearest awareness of growing and profound social discontent. She made the only mention of the Bush administration, at one

point chastising McClintock for decrying fiscal "irresponsibility" in California while condoning the Bush administration's record budget deficits. Toward the end of the event, she declared that the people of California wanted a "revolution," not a recall.

Her role, as that of her sometime electoral ally Camejo, is to corral the emerging movement of social struggle and opposition and keep it within political channels that do not fundamentally challenge the capitalist system. Hence the effort on both of their parts to portray the California crisis as largely an isolated and local issue, and obscure its relationship to the world economic crisis and the global eruption of American imperialism. Above all, they seek to obscure the fundamental issue: the failure of the profit system and the incompatibility of the needs of working people with an economic system based on the unrestrained accumulation of personal wealth.

Camejo, in particular, was far from bashful in making political nods in the direction not only of the Democrat Bustamante, whom he praised for having the "courage" to call for a referendum on tax policy, but also toward the Republican right. This one-time presidential candidate of the Socialist Workers Party praised billionaire investor and Schwarzenegger adviser Warren Buffet for criticizing Proposition 13. On several occasions he called for "fiscal responsibility" and a balanced budget and at one point seconded Schwarzenegger's demand for an audit of California's books over the past five years, i.e., Davis's tenure as governor. He also complained that "the rule of law is breaking down."

Such echoes of the Republican and Democratic platforms were combined with left-sounding calls for raising taxes (although moderately) on the rich and ending deregulation of the energy industry. On this issue, however, Camejo steered clear of any suggestion of public ownership of the utilities, declaring instead that the answer to the anarchic and socially destructive practices of the privately owned energy conglomerates was to promote renewable energy sources.

In sum, the debate—from Schwarzenegger's contemptuous refusal to even participate, to the unabashed political reaction of the Republicans who did show up, to the populist pretensions of Bustamante and the liberal nostrums of Huffington and Camejo—highlighted the need for a genuine socialist alternative to all of the parties and candidates who stand on the basis of the capitalist status quo. That alternative is being advanced by the Socialist Equality Party and its candidate in the recall election, John Christopher Burton.



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