

Peter Camejo and the Greens bid for “respectability” in California recall campaign

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The gubernatorial campaign of Peter Camejo in the California recall election marks a further turn to the right by the Green Party. The Greens and their candidate have tailored their election statements and appearances to demonstrate their “responsibility”—i.e., subordination—to the political and media establishment and the financial elite.

Camejo has taken pains to display his credentials as a defender of the profit system and allay any fears that might be aroused by his socialist past, including his campaign for the presidency in 1976 as the candidate of the Socialist Workers Party. His rival candidates and the media, for their part, have maintained a studied silence on his past identification with socialist politics.

An avid and early supporter of the drive to recall Democratic Governor Gray Davis, Camejo has established a de facto political bloc with the Republican right and its anti-democratic effort to overturn last November’s gubernatorial election. This, however, has not prevented the Green candidate from making highly conciliatory gestures toward the leading Democratic candidate in the replacement election, Lieutenant Governor Cruz Bustamante.

Over the weekend, Camejo all but dropped his stance of independence from the two major parties, openly encouraging Green supporters to vote for Bustamante on October 7 by saying he would “understand” if they did so to stave off a Republican victory.

Camejo has enjoyed generally favorable coverage in the establishment media, which has lauded him for lending a more respectable face to the Green Party. The September 1 *Sacramento Bee*, for example, carried a feature article highlighting Camejo’s career as a successful investment adviser.

Camejo, the paper reported, “as founder and chairman of a well-respected firm that manages hundreds of millions of dollars in financial investments, can match stocks-and-bonds chitchat with the most capitalistic of Wall Street brokers...”

The Greens, the *Bee* made clear, are well pleased to have Camejo as their candidate. As party spokeswoman Beth Moore Haines explained, “Green types often have an allergy to money. Greens first need to know how to get it and then use it well to promote the ideas that are important to them. And Peter has been an ambassador for that kind of thinking.”

Medea Benjamin, the Green party nominee for the US Senate in California in 2000, expanded on this theme. “He looks like a businessman,” she said. “The fact he is a broker gives him a particular credibility when it comes to finances.”

Throughout his campaign Camejo has avoided issues likely to evoke the ire of the media and political establishment or highlight the growing crisis of American capitalism. In the first two televised debates he failed to even raise the question of the war in Iraq, and in the September 24 debate in Sacramento he devoted one sentence in his closing statement to the illegal and bloody occupation of the country.

When asked after one of the debates whether he supported the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, he said he favored a United Nations

presence rather than the current US occupation. In other words, he has no principled opposition to an imperialist and colonialist occupation of Iraq, so long as it carries the window dressing of UN sanction.

Camejo has proposed no measures of even a remotely socialistic character, such as public ownership of the energy industry. In his election program, entitled “The Solution to California’s Budget Crisis Requires a Fair Tax and Fiscal Responsibility,” he has underlined his points of agreement with the Democratic Party, listing nine planks in the budget proposal of Bustamante with which he agrees and nine points with which he differs.

The Green candidate has barely mentioned the Bush administration, and instead sought to place responsibility for the budget crisis in California entirely on Gray Davis.

When Davis, seeking to rally support against the recall, told an audience at UCLA on August 19 that the recall campaign was part of a “right-wing power grab,” Camejo joined the Republicans in ridiculing the charge. The *LA Weekly* reported, in its August 22-28 issue, “Nor does [Camejo] hold the federal tax cuts responsible for bankrupting the state.” The paper quoted the Green Party candidate: “George Bush is responsible for a lot of evil in the world, but he’s not responsible for the state budget deficit in California.”

Many of Camejo’s comments on the crisis have echoed the propaganda of Republican candidates Arnold Schwarzenegger and State Senator Tom McClintock. He abjures any mention of the role of Enron and its fleecing of California, backed by the Bush administration, in the 2000-2001 energy crisis. He ignores the impact of Bush’s tax cuts for the rich and the fact that dozens of states, whether presided over by Democrats or Republicans, face budget shortfalls. He says nothing about the ballooning federal budget deficit or the impact of the huge increases in military spending and vast diversion of funds to finance the occupation of Iraq.

One of Camejo’s major demands is for an audit of state finances over the past five years—the period of Davis’s tenure—a demand that has been taken up by Schwarzenegger.

The Green Party platform

The most prominent plank in Camejo’s platform is a call for “fairness” in taxation. Pointing to the fact that the poor and the working population actually pay a larger percentage of their income in taxes than the rich, Camejo calls for a minor increase in taxation on those making \$500,000 or more. He claims a 5 percent increase in the “effective tax rate”—the real percentage after deductions and other tax breaks are taken into account—would raise \$12 billion in additional revenues. According to Camejo, this would make possible the restoration of the most recent cuts in education and health care.

Camejo—to underscore his status as a “responsible” and “legitimate” politician—adds the caveat that the reversal of recent budget cuts should be considered “only after careful review.” Even were these cuts to be restored, the social crisis in the state—with rising poverty, skyrocketing housing costs, decaying schools, and nearly 10 million people without health insurance—would remain. Camejo and the Greens propose no measures to seriously address the socially destructive and irrational workings of the profit system that underlie the crisis.

The Green Party of California, in its official endorsement of Camejo issued on August 14, stated, “Camejo’s candidacy offers California voters both fiscal wisdom and progressive values.” The invocation of “fiscal wisdom” has an unmistakable meaning in big business circles. There is very little difference between the Greens’ “fiscal wisdom and progressive values” and the phrase “fiscal conservatism and social liberalism” that is commonly invoked by Democrats and others seeking to demonstrate that they will be good stewards of the profit system.

Camejo, the Greens and the recall

There are definite political calculations behind Camejo’s portrayal of the California crisis as a purely local affair, a presentation that defies both logic and the facts. It serves the basic aim of the Greens: to utilize the recall drive to secure a place within the political establishment in California and the US as a whole.

Camejo moved quickly to lend his support to the right-wing effort to depose Davis. Well before the recall petitions had been certified, when the only other politician to announce his candidacy to replace Davis was Congressman Darrell Issa, the Republican who had bankrolled the petition drive to the tune of \$1.6 million, Camejo announced his support for the recall and proclaimed himself the Green candidate. The Greens themselves had not yet taken any position nor endorsed any candidate.

The Greens made no secret that they were internally divided over whether to support the recall, even as Camejo jumped onto the recall bandwagon in their name. To this day the California Green Party has not taken a clear position on the recall.

Camejo, presumably feeling pressure from Green Party factions opposed to the recall and polls showing declining popular support for the removal of Davis, tried to evade the question when it came up in the September 24 debate. The opportunist hide-and-seek of the Green Party on this critical question underscores the party’s lack of internal cohesion and its unprincipled and unserious attitude toward political questions. It is difficult to find a precedent for the brazen disregard for political principle that characterizes the electoral activity of the Greens.

Serious voters are obliged to ask themselves: if the Greens are unwilling and unable to speak directly and honestly on the recall question, why should any of their claims be given credence, including their supposed independence from the Democratic and Republican parties?

The Greens’ indifference and contempt for democratic considerations in relation to the recall is not an aberration. It is consistent with the positions taken by the Green Party candidate for president in 2000, Ralph Nader (who came to California in August to personally endorse Camejo’s campaign).

During the 2000 campaign Nader declared, after the fact, his support for the Republican impeachment conspiracy against Bill Clinton. He said he would have voted to convict and remove Clinton from office had he been sitting in the US Senate in early 1999.

Nader maintained his de facto bloc with the Republicans against democratic processes during the five-week stalemate over the result of the 2000 presidential election in Florida. Throughout the entire period when

the Bush campaign and the Republican Party were using all possible means—from law suits to mob attacks on election offices—to block the counting of votes and hijack the election, Nader, who had obtained 97,000 votes in Florida, maintained a deafening silence.

Had he spoken out against the Republican drive to steal the election, his voice would have carried considerable weight with the public and complicated matters for the Bush campaign. Instead, Nader performed an important political service for the forces that successfully defied the popular vote and installed the most reactionary administration in modern American history.

Who is Peter Camejo?

Several interviews and features on Camejo in the press have mentioned his campaign as a socialist candidate for president more than 25 years ago, but the subject has been played down so as not to tarnish Camejo’s current image of reform-minded businessman.

Camejo, in fact, spent some 25 years inside the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), the party that was founded in 1938 by the American supporters of Leon Trotsky and fought, for the first 20 years of its existence, for socialist principles against the betrayals of Stalinism and the Social Democratic and trade union bureaucracies.

Camejo, however, joined the SWP when it was breaking with Trotskyism. He solidarized himself with the tendency within the Trotskyist movement known as Pabloism. In 1953, as a sympathizing section of the Fourth International, the SWP had broken with the tendency, led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, which rejected the fight to build an independent revolutionary party based on the working class and instead adapted itself opportunistically to the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union and its satellite “Communist” parties, as well as to the social democratic parties and the bourgeois nationalist leaderships in the former colonial and economically backward countries of the so-called Third World. The SWP played a critical role in the formation of the International Committee of the Fourth International, which upheld the international socialist program and Marxist principles of the movement founded by Trotsky.

By the early 1960s, however, the SWP was moving toward an unprincipled reunification with the Pablo/Mandel group. Camejo, who had just joined the party, rose to prominence within the organization as it embraced Castroism, student power and protest politics, black nationalism, feminism and other forms of identity politics. By the time he ran as the SWP’s presidential candidate, the party had abandoned any struggle for the political independence of the working class and joined the middle-class radical milieu on the fringes of the Democratic Party.

Camejo’s current role was thus prepared by his tenure in the SWP and reflects the political degeneration of that party, as well as a broader layer of ex-radicals who have discovered the virtues and rewards of “working within the system.”

By the early 1980s Camejo was ready to move on, dropping his earlier socialist pretensions. He became a stockbroker, founding Progressive Asset Management and presiding over the growth of this firm, which is dedicated to “socially responsible investing” and today manages nearly \$1 billion in investments.

A bourgeois party

Today the ex-radical Camejo is spearheading the Greens' move to the right. He embodies the social and programmatic character of this party, which rejects the class struggle and any revolutionary role for the working class, and defends—whether explicitly or implicitly—capitalist property relations.

The Green Party is a bourgeois party. It has no genuine independence from the major parties of the capitalist ruling elite, nor could it, given its programmatic basis. The party is defined by its reformist perspective, which is rooted in and reflects the outlook of dissident elements within the middle classes. It can, in the end, play only a reactionary role, serving as a political lightning rod to divert social discontent along channels that are harmless to the essential interests of the ruling elite, while helping to keep the working class politically subordinated to the parties and politicians of big business.

The Greens in the US aspire to follow the example of the Greens in Germany, who unceremoniously abandoned what were supposedly their founding principles—such as anti-militarism and opposition to nuclear power—to win and retain posts in the capitalist government. One can safely predict that the rightward trajectory of this middle class party will take an even more overtly reactionary form in the United States.

Today in the US there are many workers, students and professional people who, looking for a progressive alternative to the Democrats and Republicans, are inclined to turn first to the Green Party, thinking it represents a viable and genuine alternative. A good number may vote for Camejo in the California recall election next Tuesday.

Very few of these people, however, have more than a passing knowledge of the program, policies and political practice of the Green Party. Those who are serious about changing society for the better will examine these questions, and recognize that the Greens represent a diversion and deception.

The experience of social struggles and political upheavals will, moreover, contribute to the clarification of new layers of youth and workers, and point them in the direction of the struggle for socialist internationalism and the political independence of the working class. This is the perspective fought for by the Socialist Equality Party and its candidate in the California recall election, John Christopher Burton.



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