

Opinion Journal Political Diary

June 7, 2005

Arnold's Army

Los Angeles -- California is back open for business. Well, sort of. All of the economic signs have turned north over the past 18 months under Arnold Schwarzenegger's watch. Tax revenues are way up this year and the state budget deficit is down by half. Now there's another reason to be bullish on California: the high-speed political transformation that may end up repainting the Left Coast from dark blue to red, or at least purple, by 2006.

This weekend more than 300 Republican political activists and deep-pocketed donors from around the state crammed into a standing-room only meeting in the ballroom of the Crown Plaza Hotel in Los Angeles to plot how conservatives can take back their state from the economic loony-tune agenda of the Democratic legislature in Sacramento. Call them Arnold's Army. Organized by former Assemblyman Tony Strickland and conservative spokesman Shawn Steel, the event marked the successful launch of the California Club for Growth, whose backers pledged \$5 million to \$10 million in the current election cycle to support free-market Republicans running for office across the state. The new group could very quickly turn into the most politically potent PAC in California. Its superstar supporters include radio talk show host Larry Elder, Reagan chief economist Arthur Laffer and Congressman Dana Rohrabacher. What's more, the biggest buzz of the session concerned efforts to draft former congressman and Clinton impeachment House manager Jim Rogan to run for the House seat being vacated by Chris Cox.

There was near-unanimous agreement that returning the state to semi-normalcy requires enacting Arnold's slate of ballot initiatives. Joel Fox, one of the co-chairman of Citizens to Save California, shared with me promising early poll results from a May 25th survey taken by McLaughlin & Associates. The poll shows that virtually all of the measures start with wide public support. For example, a proposal to reform teacher tenure by requiring at least five years of experience (rather than the current measly two years) has 68% approval. The governor's budget reform -- watered down but at least a check against another Gray Davis tsunami of red ink -- attracts 55% voter support. The Paycheck Protection Act against compulsory union dues from government employees to pay for political activities has two-thirds approval (68% vs. 25%). Perhaps the most urgent measure of all, the redistricting proposal to create at least semi-competitive political districts, has a 71% approval rating.

But don't think for a moment that the Granola-eating left in California is in retreat. A bill in the legislature would extend full civil rights protections to cross dressers; there's a ballot initiative that has already qualified to re-regulate the electricity markets (which would almost surely bring back brownouts); and the teachers unions have pledged to raise \$50 million by hiking mandatory membership dues to squash Paycheck Protection and budget reform. This would be in addition to the millions already spent on ads to hammer Arnold for allegedly shortchanging education in the current budget. The truth: the education budget rose by \$3 billion in 2005, the largest increase in the state's history.

Gov. Schwarzenegger is expected next week to call officially for placing his crucial reform initiatives on the ballot in a special election this November. Then the real battle for the soul of California begins.