

Norby Notes

Orange County Update

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Total Recall: Uncharted Waters for California Governance

The Recall Election of Arnold Schwarzenegger marks a profound break in California governance. There is no precedence to predict what has or will happen. Sacramento is a two-party town again, that's for sure. Anything now seems possible—good or bad.

Schwarzenegger has surrounded himself with a vast array of advisors. Leadership must still come from the top, and too many advisors are prone to argue among themselves about what their boss really believes, or ought to believe.

Even the Democratic-dominated legislature should respond to positive new leadership from the top. This is a real opportunity for bipartisan reform. Constitutional changes through ballot initiatives should always be a last resort, once the legislative route is exhausted.

Let's Think Outside the Boxes

Overshadowed by the Recall and outspent 10-1, Proposition 54 went down without the balanced debate it deserved. Left unresolved the role of race in public policy or even how race and ethnicity are defined in California's increasingly complex human mosaic.

When my son, Alex, enrolled into the eighth grade at Ladera Vista Jr. High School, his registration form included the following instructions:

Ethnicity (Check One): Asian, Black, White, Filipino, Hispanic, Pacific Islander, American Indian or Eskimo.

Alex's mother is Chinese-American. I'm Norwegian-American. What is he to do?

The instructions left no other options. He had to check one box. There were no instructions to "check all that apply," no "other" category, or an allowance to simply leave the whole thing blank.

Check one.

What kind of a policy or institution would make a child choose between his own parents?

There are over a million Californians of mixed ethnicity who do not fit neatly into the boxes created by the racial bean counters. These racial boxes have crept into nearly every governmental and academic form.

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What kind of message do we send our kids when asking them to “check one box”? Why do we insist on people defining themselves according to arbitrary, outdated and anthropologically dubious categories?

Proposition 54 would have ended the practice by California state and local governments of foisting racial categories and perpetuating racial statistics that are divisive and increasingly meaningless. The gathering of increasingly inaccurate and irrelevant racial data, in fact, serves to divide our state and perpetuate stereotypes.

These statistics are becoming irrelevant because of the ambiguity of the categories themselves. The federal Census Bureau, for example, does not consider “Hispanic” to be a race at all, and anyone may check both “Hispanic” and “White” on census forms. In the 2000 census, fully 64% of Hispanics also identified themselves as “White,” while another 9% checked two or more other races. Yet the State counts Hispanics and Whites as mutually exclusive.

Conversely, the state definition of “Asian” includes Chinese, Burmese and Pakistanis. Yet, Iranians, Turks and Arabs, who also originate from Asia are designated as “White.” What real meaning do these distinctions have?

Then there are those of multiple ethnic parentage. Should we multiply all the possible combinations into their own separate categories? Or count multi-racial as one single category? Or create a new box for anyone to check: American!

People should be free to identify with whatever races, nationalities, customs and cultures they choose. It’s fun to celebrate St. Patrick’s Day, Cinco de Mayo, Chinese New Year or have a Christmas Tree (of distinctly German origin). But this identification should be personal, and not a state requirement.

Like our religious beliefs, one’s personal identity should be as private or public as one chooses to make it. You can wear it on your sleeve, or keep it in your heart. But the state should not force you to wear a permanent racial nametag.

Like all other countries, America wrestles with the question of racial discrimination and ethnic divisions. Prejudice remains real today. To overcome it, however, we should embrace our commonalities, not cling to past differences. One segment of our society no longer has the right to designate others “minorities,” or to continue with racial divisions that only divide us.

To get into eighth grade, my son had to check only one of seven racial boxes. Let’s replace them all with only one racial category: the Human Race!

No Federal Funds for CenterLine; Better Alternatives Seen

The \$1 billion CenterLine proposal has always assumed at least \$400 million in federal funding. The huge chunk, however, has never been authorized by Congress and CenterLine received nothing in the recent appropriation bill. With a growing federal deficit and a blank check needed for Iraq, future grants are problematic.

In addition, 480 total private parcels have now been identified as being needed to complete the CenterLine/Bristol widening. Many are small businesses. Most are families who can ill afford to find comparable housing anywhere else in Orange County.

For those who don’t go quietly, eminent domain will be required. It is unclear whether such eminent domain hearings (never pleasant, always lengthy) will be conducted by the OCTA Board, or by the Santa

Ana City Council.

Dropping a transit system onto a dense urban area is costly and disruptive. There are far better alternative routes using existing rail rights-of-way. No eminent domain. No costly relocation.

The proposed Santa Ana-to-L.A. "Orange Line" would whisk commuters along the existing Pacific Electric route, connecting Garden Grove, Buena Park, Cypress, Cerritos, Downey and other intermediate stops. Another existing rail line connects Brea with La Habra, Whittier, Montebello and Downtown L.A. Let's look at regional transit routes offering rapid alternatives to motorists.

Fair Park Fund Allocation Sought

\$14 million in Prop. 40 park bond money will soon be available to Orange County. The Board of Supervisors must decide how to fairly divvy up these funds. Staff recommends all the money be spent on the existing county park system, but few of these parks are in north and central Orange County.

Supervisor Smith and I favor a fair and even 5-way split among the supervisorial districts, with the funds being available for the cities to use for pressing recreational needs. Smith has no county parks in his district. I have one (Clark) and part of another (Craig).

If the funds are put exclusively into the county system, the benefits will be disproportional to south and coastal Orange County, at the expense of park poor older areas. The board split 3-2 on this issue last year, with Spitzer, Coad and Smith backing the 5-way district division. If that vote holds again, the Fourth District will be in line for \$2.8 million. The vote will be at our October 28 meeting.
