



January 20, 2010, 11:33PM PST

By: Sharon Waxman

Debating Gray Davis in New York: California Fails, Wins

(This is written a bit late due to being slain by intestinal dragons.)

You could say it wasn't a fair fight.

With a proposal like, "California is the First Failed State," the debate on Tuesday seemed a foregone conclusion. Those of us who live in the state and watch the news trot out a litany of funeral announcements for successive state services – education, medical care for the poor, arts programs, government paychecks – kind of thought it was obvious.

And then there was this: Gray Davis, the governor who was recalled by the voters, was arguing against the motion.

Despite that, we were determined to win. We, in this instance, constituted Economist writer Andreas Kluth, Santa Monica Council-member and philanthropic entrepreneur Bobby Shriver (brother in law of the current, post-recall guvnah) and myself.

The occasion was the convening of a formal debate by Intelligence Squared, a New York based event sponsored by the Rosenkranz Foundation devoted to raising the level of public discourse to the kind of spirited exchange we don't often get to see on this side of the ocean.

And it was. That's because the former governor was joined by Van Jones, an environmental activist most recently departed from the Obama White House and Lawrence O'Donnell, the canny and pithy actor-producer-political commentator-pinch-hitter-MSNBC-host. (I told Lawrence he has all the fun and none of the aggravation of both Hollywood and Washington, and how'd he manage to do that.)

What's it like to debate Gray Davis? I did wonder that ahead of time. I'll only say his defense of California was strongly reminiscent of his defense of California while he was governor.

But I can't say a bad thing about the guy, since at one point in the debate he managed to utterly disarm by saying, 'I have great respect for Sharon Waxman.' Then he disarmed himself when he went on to explain that this was because his wife was also named Sharon.

Still, I thought we'd lost the motion as soon as O'Donnell stood up. He was funny, loose and pointed out a salient point – if the audience could find one, just one, other state that was in worse shape than California, they should oppose the motion.

Luckily, though, we managed to discredit this approach as frivolous. As Andreas Kluth pointed out, the legislative gridlock in Sacramento, the declining services, the initiative process that makes it impossible for the state to raise the revenues it needs – all this constitutes a failure of the state.

Bobby Shriver made a rather unassailable point: the state is seeking a constitutional convention to change fundamental functions of governance. If the state hadn't failed, why in the world would it be seeking such a move? (Slick one, Bobby.)

Gray Davis and Van Jones both made spirited defenses of California's long-recognized resources – its weather, its natural beauty, its innovative people. Its Google, its Intel, its Apple.

But I pointed out that Hollywood had fled the state – in terms of production the state now has only half the movie productions it had in 1996 – and that the state has made little to no effort to keep this valuable industry in place.

The audience voted: 58 % agreed. I argued, as did Bobby and Andreas, that voting California as a failed state was the first step in the right direction. Validating the status quo is no way to fix what's wrong in the state. And apparently the audience agreed.

The debate will be televised on PBS, Bloomberg and will be heard on NPR stations everywhere though, not, I am told, on KCRW. (Come on, Ruth Seymour!)

Here are the Bloomberg air dates, which is all I know so far:

January 25-27 at 7pm EST/4pm PST

January 30 at 8am EST/5am PST, 2pm EST/11am PST, 7pm EST/4pm PST, 11pm EST/8pm PST, 11pm PST

January 31 at 2am EST, 7am EST/4am PST, 5pm EST/2pm PST

Source URL: <http://www.thewrap.com/ind-column/debating-gray-davis-new-york-california-fails-13295>