



CALIFORNIA
Energy Circuit
AN INDEPENDENT PUBLICATION

Overseer's Undercurrent The Revenge of San Francisco Values for Energy and Environmental Activism

November 10, 2006

In the waning weeks of their desperate national campaign to retain control of Congress, Republican leaders and pundits tried to sway voters with a political bogeyman: "San Francisco values." Instead of running against individual candidates in any number of too-close-to-call races, the Red Team ganged up on the Blue Team's leader, Nancy Pelosi - who, as everyone now knows, will become the first female speaker of the House of Representatives.

Our local radio station that specializes in broadcasting right-wing chatter kept running a newspaper ad warning that Pelosi would be "two heartbeats away" from the presidency. Not that that makes any literal sense at all, but then again, it came from an all-talk radio station.

Now the election is over, it's certain that Democrats will rule not only the House but the Senate as well. That means more power and visibility for Pelosi, and for Senators Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein. Maybe even for Representative Barbara Lee of Oakland.

Talk about the revenge of San Francisco values - especially those favoring diversity, intelligence, concern for the environment, and the uncanny ability to match ideals with pragmatic approaches (while knowing a thing or two about style, good food, and fine wines). No wonder some politicians were running scared.

And if you want to take it further, the election also represented the defeat of the anti-San Franciscan Congress member Richard Pombo, whose 11th Congressional District follows an odd, gerrymandered course from suburban Dublin/Pleasanton south to Morgan Hill, back up the Central Valley to Stockton and Lodi, and then southeast to Manteca and Escalon. Pombo's defeat was the top priority for environmental groups from around the country, as it means significant change for the House Resources Committee.

At this writing, I'm not sure who will take over Resources for the Democrats. Congress member Nick Rahall of West Virginia is the subject of speculation. But even if coal miners have a new best friend, the change probably means the death of attempts to reform/gut the Endangered Species Act.

Far away from the Bay Area, Oklahoma Republican senator James Inhofe will remain in the Senate but no longer will run the powerful Environment and Public Works Committee, which oversees everything from the Department of Energy to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Who gets control? Our very own Barbara Boxer.

Northern California will not have direct control over the major energy committees, but we can expect greater influence as the Blue Team gets to appoint new chairs. Michigan Congress member John Dingell is expected to be chair of the House Energy and Commerce Committee. Senator Jeff Bingaman (D-New Mexico) will likely be in charge of the Senate's Energy and Natural Resources panel.

With Senator Harry Reid (D-Nevada) as the new head of the Senate, a Yucca Mountain nuclear waste repository doesn't stand a chance.

The early buzz from D.C. sources - that is, from journalistic colleagues who follow this stuff a lot more closely than I do - is that all this adds up to expectations for a fundamental shift in energy and environmental policies, almost across the board.

While San Francisco values may not rule in all cases, the winners' laundry list of major issues to be addressed in the new Congress certainly sounds familiar to those of us who live and work in this region. That includes climate change and carbon controls; renewables portfolio standards and stable

tax credits; energy efficiency and appliance standards; and biofuels and new technologies that don't necessarily involve finding a place to stash CO2.

Off the table, according to most pundits: ESA reform, oil drilling in the Outer Continental Shelf and ANWR; Yucca Mountain as our only alternative. Issues to be revisited through oversight committee activities: tax breaks for fossil fuels that were in the 2005 Energy Policy Act; royalty payments (or nonpayments) for oil production; and - said Rep. Dingell in a news conference - those 2001 energy policy meetings between Vice-President Dick Cheney and Ken Lay (among other participants we still don't fully know about).

You can see why people frequently are using the terms "day and night" or "180-degree turnaround."

In terms of legislation, change won't be easy or occur overnight. Feinstein has already promised a package of energy/environmental bills heavy on carbon restrictions, car/truck emissions standards, and renewable energy supports, but she still must line up 60 votes to make everything filibuster-proof. Representative Henry Waxman from the Los Angeles area will find common cause with his Northern California colleagues for House versions of this package, but it needs to get past Michigan Congress member John Dingell, who represents the Detroit auto industry - not the Toyota hybrid factories.

Like everyone else, I have my favorite issues among those listed above. But here's what I hope the new leaders do not waste time on: stomping on Ken Lay's dead bones; undoing the new powers over liquefied natural gas or market monitoring given to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission in EPAct; deciding that ethanol and "clean coal" will save us all; or throwing a lot of public money at hydrogen highways or nuclear energy (better to spend it on figuring out what to do with the stockpiles of waste).

Although it is probably the most bipartisan of rhetorical issues, something both Speaker Pelosi and President Bush can agree upon, the whole concept of "energy independence" is, to me, a fallacy. Charting a course toward a post-petroleum future, yes; doing our best to prevent adverse global climate change, while preparing to adapt. Elevating efficiency and conservation above ravaging the environment, I can only hope.

But energy independence is a pipe dream, and the pipes would flow out of the wilderness and across the prairies and everywhere else. Energy is not just a domestic policy issue, but also a worldwide support system, and we have to figure out how to make that system work without pretending we can cut ourselves off from global interdependence.

I think that's a San Francisco value, too.
- Arthur O'Donnell

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