"They Count on You Not Knowing"

written by Steve Early | September 29, 2018

Wealthy Bay Area investor David Crane is a leading promoter of the neoliberal agenda within the California Democratic Party. A former advisor to Republican governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, Crane is a widely-published critic of state and local tax initiatives, publicly-funded health care, public education, public employees and their pensions. He raises lots of money for "courageous" candidates willing to put "citizen interests" ahead of such "special interest" causes.

According to Crane, Left Coast governance suffers from voters paying insufficient "attention to the legislators who run their state." In a TED talk delivered in Palo Alto, where Crane lectures at Stanford, the multi-millionaire chided members of his well-heeled audience for being unable to identify their representatives in Sacramento or being unfamiliar with their "voting behavior." Crane delivers his message, in casual tech industry attire, but his talk is ominously entitled: "They Count On You Not Knowing." (See https://www.governforcalifornia.org/who-we-are/.)

To elect more candidates who will "govern with independence from special interests," Crane started a fund-raising machine called Govern for California, with $250, 000 of his own "seed money." His co-founders six years ago were SF billionaire Ron Conway, and Gregory Penner, a venture capitalist and current board chair of Walmart, who is married to Carrie Walton, granddaughter of the firm's founder (making them one of the richest couples in the country),

According to its website, Govern for California is now a network of more than 250 like-minded *"political philanthropists."* Others have described the group, less sympathetically, as a charter school fan club, replete with "donors who have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars supporting right-wing candidates and policies here in California and other states. (See https://48hills.org/2018/06/big-right-wing-money-east-bay/.)

The donor class hubris reflected in Crane's preferred organizational branding will be familiar to any reader of Anand Giridharadas's brilliant new book, *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World.* In that author's insider expose of what he calls "Marketworld" philanthropy, the wealthy are less "interested in making politics work better" than "insisting on their proprietary power to give the world what it needs."

An Obama-Backed Candidate

At the moment, David Crane is very insistent that my own California Assembly District 15 needs to be represented by a former White House staffer named Buffy Wicks. With the help of nearly $500,000 in primary spending by Govern for California, Wicks placed first in a field of ten Democrats and one token Republican in June. She is enthusiastically backed by former President Obama, US Senator Kamala Harris, US Congressman Ro Khanna, our soon-to-be governor Gavin Newsom, and

two prominent Democratic mayors, Libby Schaaf from Oakland and London Breed from San Francisco.

In the AD 15 run-off this fall, Wicks faces stiff, if under-funded, competition from Jovanka Beckles, a two-term Richmond city council member. Beckles is a leading East Bay critic of big money in politics who belongs to Democratic Socialists of America and the Our Revolution-affiliated Richmond Progressive Alliance. (For more on the political views and local record that differentiate Beckles from Wicks, see https://jacobinmag.com/2018/09/jovanka-beckles-state--assembly-richmond-candidate.)

Fortunately for the cause of voter education in AD 15 over the next seven weeks, East Bay DSA has taken Crane's warning—"they count on you not knowing"—very seriously. But not quite the way he intended.

On Monday, Sept. 17, a group of DSA volunteers unveiled buffywicks.money, a whistle-blowing website designed, in part, to debunk Wicks' repeated claim that she doesn't take "corporate money."

In creative, humorous, and suitably outraged fashion, this model intervention in local electoral politics puts a human face on the "high dollar" donors, industry associations, and "independent expenditure" groups financing her run for office (to the tune of $1,450,783 so far).

Buffywicks.money is worth replicating elsewhere because the corporate Democrat in question is hardly *sui generis*. In an article entitled "'The Baton Got Dropped': Obama Alums Rush to Finish What He Started," *Politico* recently reported that Wicks is part of a broader wave of Obama-inspired candidates now running for non-federal office in order to "usher in the progressive era that was promised."

Ride-Sharing Help

In Wicks' case, two well-known White House colleagues have been particularly helpful in passing "the baton" to her. One of her initial fund-raisers was David Plouffe, who became a Senior Vice President at Uber after his Obama Administration service and now directs the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, a "change-the-world" foundation in the *Winner Take All* mode. More recently, Valerie Jarrett, another top White House advisor to Obama, personally campaigned for Wicks in AD 15. Jarrett recently joined the board of Lyft, which further explains why so many Wicks' donors hold management jobs at ride sharing firms now fighting to overturn a state court ruling favorable to drivers. (See https://www.jovanka.org/beckles_condemns_uber_lyft_bid_to_over_turn_state_court_-decision_protecting_gig_economy_workers.)

At buffywicks.money, we discover that Wicks' donor base is much broader than the gig economy—both in terms of direct donors (limited, by state law, to giving $8,800 each) and her independent spenders, like Govern for California. The latter have post-*Citizens United* permission to spend as much as they want, just as long as they don't coordinate with their favored candidate's own campaign.

A savvy organizer and proven coalition builder, Wicks has been able to unite other tech titans (among them billionaire Craig Newmark of Craigslist fame), investment bankers, landlords, real estate developers, corporate lawyers, consultants, and lobbyists, not to mention California's influential statewide associations of doctors and dentists—all under one big tent!

***Tench and Simone Coxe** are, for example, one power couple now drawing East Bay socialist scrutiny and scorn on buffywicks.money. Tench hails from "Sutter Hill ventures, one of the oldest venture capital firms in Silicon Valley," and, before that, the gone but not forgotten Lehman

Brothers. Simone has "entered the tech start up world with Equestrian Connect, a service to register your horse online for horse shows." Previous beneficiaries of their spare change have included Mitt Romney, Republican House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, and the Republican National Committee (RNC). But now Buffy has caught their fancy too—along with climate change denying Republicans like McCarthy?

***John and Regina Scully** love Buffy too (although not quite as much as campaigns against taxes on the wealthy to provide better funding for California schools, a cause they spent half a million on unsuccessfully two years ago.) As boss of a Mill Valley, CA. investment firm, 69-year old John manages $10 billion worth of assets, generating enough disposable income to spend $400,000 on a model train set in the basement of his vacation home in East Hampton, Long Island. Both Scullys serve on the board of Success Academy, whose co-founder just spent heavily on the pro-charter school incumbent just defeated by Julia Salazar in her NY state senate race.

***Reid Hoffman,** with a net worth of about $4.7 billion, has also maxed out for Buffy, after co-founding Linkedin and serving as an early executive at PayPal. Hoffman "penned a neo-liberal self help book called *The Start Up of You* that encourages workers to embrace the precarity of the job market and consider themselves an entrepreneurial business-of- one"—a blue-print for Wick's own post-White House career trajectory?

***Scott Kepner.** As East Bay DSA discovered, this real estate investor and Republican donor poured $125,000 into the pockets of the RNC nine Republican hopefuls two years ago, including Paul Ryan, Tom Cotton, Pat Toomey, and Jeb Bush. This year, Kepner is betting on Buffy–perhaps because she doesn't support Proposition 10, a ballot measure that would allow cities like Richmond, Berkeley, Oakland, and San Francisco to expand their tenant protections. California landlords, the real estate industry, and big Wall Street firms are all spending millions to defeat Prop 10.

***Ron Conway** is described by DSA as "a notoriously unpleasant billionaire" and San Francisco's answer to the Koch Brothers (because of "the heavy handed way he uses his extreme wealth to subvert democracy"). He's been on the wrong side of local political skirmishing over tenant protection and city hall treatment of homeless people. (Buffy's main political consulting firm, 50+1, is also working, on behalf of the SF Chamber of Commerce, to defeat a local business tax increase designed to fund more housing for the homeless.) Adding to his indirect support via Govern for California, Conway wrote personal checks to Buffy totaling $8,800.

***Christopher Garland** "maxed out" for Wicks as well, in his role as a powerful Silicon Valley player, renowned for "connecting wealthy tech donors to politicians looking for money and direction."

Garland has been both a political advisor to Facebook billionaire Sean Parker and chief of staff for Gavin Newsom, our current lieutenant governor. Newsom has raised $45 million, from wealthy donors and special interest groups, for his campaign to succeed Jerry Brown as governor. Garland probably helped arrange a joint campaign event, last week, between Wicks and Newsom, who've both gotten financial support from the California Medical Association.

At their Berkeley love-in, Newsom, a putative supporter of single payer health care, embraced Wicks, who doesn't support SB 562, the single payer bill promoted by the California Nurses Association, an early Newsom endorser. If Newsom was serious about passing SB 562, in some future form, wouldn't he want an additional reliable Assembly vote in favor of it? Apparently not.

A Model Initiative

As DSA's website researchers and writers note, "Buffy herself is not really the problem in this race;

the problem is the corrosive and antidemocratic effects this obscene amount of money has on our local politics." Eliminating or even reducing its election impact will not be easy in AD 15 or anywhere else. But East Bay DSA vice-chair Frances Reade believes that "dot.moneying" those responsible can be a helpful first step, when combined with the other volunteer activity of scores of DSA members, who are knocking on doors, making phone calls, and registering voters for Jovanka Beckles.

"If you have some free time and are nosy, it's very easy," Reade says. Her fellow DSA communications committee members accessed campaign finance reports filed with the state, googled the names of key Wicks' donors and Super-PAC supporters, and collected past reporting on their industry backgrounds and political connections. The resulting donor profiles have already drawn thousands of visitors, who according to Reade, are "spending a lot of time scrolling through the site."

One surprise to the researchers was how much "fawning coverage Democratic mega donors routinely get," at the same time they are "pouring money into races all across the country" on behalf of charter school supporters. Unlike the conservative villains of Jane Mayer' *Dark Money,* which profiled members of donor networks associated with the Koch Brothers, prominent members of the Democratic Party's donor class lay claim to greater enlightenment because of their past ties to the Obama Administration, Hillary Clinton's presidential run, or issue oriented campaigns involving non-economic issues.

The bottom line for DSA is that "in a real democracy, the wealthy should not be able to buy elections or legislation," as Reade says. "My California assembly member should be accountable to voters like me and my neighbors, not to the agenda of billionaires, here and in other states."

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