

It Isn't Easy Being Green ... Especially Now

Upstart Party Uneasily Balances Grassroots Idealism and Mainstream Aspirations

By David Cogan

In the high-stakes, money-driven campaign for Dianne Feinstein's U.S. Senate seat, few have heard of Kent Smith or Barbara Blong. Although these candidates — who are vying for the Green Party's nomination — may be long shots to win in November, they are nevertheless engaged in an intra-party fight that may shape the future of the nascent Green Party in California politics.

The California Green Party was founded in 1990, six years after a group of activists met at the home of *Tao of Physics* author Fritjof Capra to discuss organizing such a movement. By late 1991, aided by demonstrations against the Gulf War, party organizers had registered 103,000 voters in California. Today, the Green Party boasts fifty-eight local officeholders across the state, almost two dozen of them elected.

The current acrimony within party ranks comes at a most inopportune time — during the Greens' first run for statewide offices. Instead of arguing over the party platform, members are at odds over the internal party process and style of presenting its message.

Senate candidates Blong and Smith actually agree on most issues. Both believe that crime is best addressed by improving education and fostering economic opportunity and urban renewal, not by building more prisons. Both criticize Feinstein for scapegoating immigrants. Foremost, however, they deeply believe in the "ten key values" of the Green Party, which include diversity, decentralization, and social justice.

But during a recent visit to Los Angeles, home to more than twelve thousand of the state's Greens, Blong was candid about the issues that set her apart from her opponent. She criticized Smith for playing into the current, Machiavellian political system. "Green politics has to appear to the public ... different

than the Republicans and Democrats," says Blong.

She says that in the name of diversity, a man — even if he is a Green Party candidate — should not try to unseat one of the six women in the U.S. Senate. "It is important that people understand that postpatriarchy/feminism [one of the ten key values] does not mean business as usual," she says. Her opponent, she adds, "isn't stepping aside from the rhetoric and the method of mainstream party politics."

Smith's reputation in some Green circles as a non-team player, and as someone whose aggressive style is "insensitive to gender issues," crystallized at the party's January state convention in San Francisco. Leading a group of dissenters, Smith helped defeat a motion to close all but three lower statewide offices to Green candidates. The motion was the product of a committee that decided that the most beneficial election-year strategy would be for Greens to continue concentrating on organizing at the local level until the party's base was stronger, while still getting out its message to the state's

voters via the lieutenant governor and secretary of state races. (A candidate for attorney general later dropped out.)

However, a number of Greens, including Smith and John Lewallen, who decided to run for governor, defeated the motion, a move that had required an almost unattainable 80 percent "super-majority" of party activists. "It seemed to me to be a gross violation of grassroots democracy to have eighty people make the decision that should be made by our full membership," Smith says.

Competitive Green Party primaries are the only means of preventing registered party members from defecting to the Democratic party for a "meaningful" primary, says Smith. A longtime party activist, Smith views the attacks upon his and Blong's candidacies as "sour grapes" by those who were defeated under established party procedures.

Further, Smith and other Greens view this election as an important time to run a full slate of candidates, since it is the last major statewide forum for promoting Green principles until 1998. Smith's complaint with Blong's faction, he says, is that "they are mentally locked into minority status. I am con-



Barbara Blong



Kent Smith

vinced the Green Party has incredible potential in California."

Smith predicts that his aggressive strategy will bring him one million votes — three times more than any qualified third-party candidate has ever received — in the November election.

To some Green leaders, Smith's aggressive rhetoric is the main problem with his candidacy. Danny Moses, a founding member of the California Greens and a candidate for lieutenant governor, believes Smith has made a tactical error and criticized him openly at the January gathering. Those who agree have initiated an active "None of the Above" campaign

in the governor's race, and to a lesser extent in the senate race, to clean the slate.

The friction could either eat away at the Green Party's cohesion, or be a constructive step in its long-term development of consensus among activists. Moses believes the conflict is part of the party's growing process. He says the voters will be the ultimate arbiters of whether they want a new approach to politics. "In my campaign I am saying, here is one version of how Green politics works, what it has to say," says Moses. "You can judge for yourself if it is appealing to you."