

# Jill Stewart

## Dissing the Voters

**The power crowd wants you to think charter reform is much too complicated for poor, dumb, little voters like yourself to understand. It ain't**

Whenever the extremely powerful and their brethren, the well-connected, consistently describe voters as "too confused" to understand a complex public issue, which deeply impacts the extremely powerful and the well-connected, you can pretty much bet your entire 401k that the confused are in danger of being seriously screwed.

I recall with surprisingly fresh bitterness the widespread and almost hysterical insistence among entrenched politicians, university professors, and other members of the power elite that the 1978 homeowner's property tax rollback known as Proposition 13 would plunge California and Los Angeles into economic despair and devastate our quality of life.

But the deeply "confused" voters ignored the doomsaying power brokers (including Gray Davis) and joined the property tax revolution, giving Proposition 13 a landslide victory. As "confused" voters had suspected, the only truly serious economic despair was limited to the badly bloated government employee unions, their fat-bottomed bosses, and the smarmy insiders who dominated the government contracting scams of the era. It hurt, but California eventually shrugged off the tax rollbacks and learned to live more within its means.

I also recall the almost hysterical insistence among pundits, entrenched politicians, et al., that the revolution to force term limits upon elected officials would plunge California and Los Angeles into years of political crisis and spawn incoherent new laws written by inexperienced new lawmakers.

The deeply "confused" voters ignored the doomsaying power brokers (including then-Mayor Tom Bradley) and approved term limits in city halls around the state, on the Legislature, and on the governor. As the "confused" voters had suspected, the only political crises struck inside the fossilized political fiefdoms. Nor did waves of incoherent new laws materialize, because the inexperienced lawmakers were, by and large, quicker and better educated than the prehistoric crowd long in office.

Now a huge contingent of the most powerful and well-connected people in Los Angeles are insisting that L.A. city voters should not be given two competing choices about how to reform the circus government that controls Los Angeles City Hall.

You see, giving voters a choice between two approaches will "confuse" them and lead to disastrous consequences.

Earlier this month, really important people with really important jobs and really

concerned facial expressions insisted that if voters are allowed to pick between two different Charter Reform initiatives—one of which would dramatically rewrite the city's constitution and another which would rewrite it less dramatically—the voters will be confused and in their confusion will reject both reform plans.

Erwin Chemerinsky, the constitutional lawyer of O.J. Simpson trial-commentator fame who chairs the Elected Charter Commission, said last week, "voters will be confused and vote down both reform proposals." Julie Butcher, the loudmouthed Jackie Goldberg clone who is regional head of the Service Employees International Union, insisted that "voters will be confused by being given two choices." Moreover, if two choices are offered to voters, Butcher publicly threatened, she will launch "a vitriolic fight of name-calling" against the more dramatic reform plan (because it will weaken Butcher's growing power). Xandra Kayden, the frequent L.A. Times pundit, insisted that "voter confusion will likely lead to failure of both reform plans." And the Times' editorial writers urged that voters be given only one choice.

clearly, are deeply concerned about the mental acuity of the voters.

**Scenario One:** The mayor of Los Angeles finds out from the city's Chief Administrative Officer that staggering late fees are being charged to the city on its Pacific Bell phone bill, amounting to an incredible \$400,000 per year. The city owes the money because the Chief Administrative Officer asked for more funding to pay City Hall's exploding phone bill—\$17 million per year—but the mayor insisted that phone calls be limited to \$15 million per year. Ignoring their tightened budget, city bureaucrats allowed city workers to make \$17 million in calls, then illogically ducked the problem by paying the bills late—so late, in fact, that taxpayers must pay huge late fees.

The Chief Administrative Officer keeps this fiscal problem to himself, not alerting the Mayor until long after the incredible fees have piled up.

Under the most dramatic Charter Reform plan, the mayor of Los Angeles (whoever that is after Mayor Richard Riordan steps down because of term limits that he himself forced upon City Hall) can immediately fire the city department head responsi-

Last week, Scenario One actually happened. Keith Comrie, the city's overrated CAO, who would have lost his job years ago if he were operating in the private sector, attempted to blame Riordan for the Pacific Bell late-fee scandal. In an unintentionally humorous slam on the mayor, Comrie actually declared that Riordan was at fault for not giving the famously wasteful, civil-service-protected City Hall employees the \$17 million they had demanded.

Herewith, I'd like to invite Comrie to come to my house and handle my budget, because I just hate the fact that I can't afford to call my 16 nieces and nephews scattered around the world. I feel certain that Comrie will agree that this is the fault of my editors, who should give me more money to meet my budgetary needs.

**Scenario Two:** Without a shred of public review, the City Council agrees to apply for \$87 million in public funds to help a group of millionaires from New York and Beverly Hills build so-called "affordable" housing smack in the middle of the troubled Ballona Wetlands. Since the application is virtually guaranteed state approval, the huge gift of taxpayer funds is a done deal.

Under the most dramatic Charter Reform plan, no such controversial and far-ranging votes could sneak through without public review by a city-funded neighborhood planning council made up of interested residents of the affected area. The neighborhood council could either be elected by a vote of all neighbors or chosen by a neighborhood caucus. The planning councils, although having only advisory powers, would not answer to the City Council, which would be required by the Charter to fund the councils one year in advance.

Under the less dramatic, compromise Charter Reform plan, such controversial decisions to enrich millionaires with public funds could still sneak through City Hall. Much of the action would play out within a new, Council-controlled bureaucracy known as the Office of Neighborhood Empowerment (or ONE, which is a damn frightening name). ONE would develop a system of neighborhood councils whose every detail would be subject to approval of—you guessed it—the City Council.

Last month, Scenario Two actually happened.

City Councilwoman Ruth Galanter has accepted thousands of dollars in contributions from lawyers representing filthy rich developers who have long planned to build 13,000 condos on the Ballona Wetlands just inland from Venice Beach. It was hardly a surprise, then, when the pro-development Galanter subverted the normal hearing process in City Hall in December and virtually assured \$87 million for her greedy, wetland-destroying pals.

Galanter is no genius, and her financing scam wasn't that hard to pull off, since most of her 14 Council colleagues would love to pull similar sneaky acts. So they let Galanter take her plan directly to the City Council, avoiding usual procedures in which a three-person Council committee hears public testimony on such major development proposals before deciding whether to take the proposal to the full council, or to kill the proposal outright.

If locally created neighborhood councils



Is it just me, or aren't there a hell of a lot of players from the above list who hysterically opposed term limits and Proposition 13 and held voters in the same contemptuous regard during those battles? And, isn't it curious that the power brokers who are calling for just one ballot choice for voters all insist that the *more milquetoast, compromise reform plan* be the sole choice offered?

So, in the spirit of civic duty, I offer the voters an easy guide to understanding how the two Charter Reform plans differ. I sincerely hope that my easy-to-use guide can provide some modicum of relief to the above-mentioned power brokers who,

ble for the cost overruns. Even better, he can fire the Chief Administrative Officer who failed to blow the whistle.

Under the less dramatic, compromise Charter Reform plan, the next mayor has to avoid angering at least five of the 15 members of the City Council if he fires the bungling department head or the incompetent CAO. If 10 or more councilmembers disagree with the firing, they can quickly override the mayor. This is a highly likely scenario since the Council per-versely prefers to blow \$400,000 in scarce taxes than to fire bureaucrats long trained to jump at its beck and call.

existed, Galanter's scam to enrich the rich would have been dragged through the mudflats and shoved down the nearest clam hole. Councilmembers would have faced extensive public ridicule, perhaps reaching the scale of public scorn heaped on Seattle city officials when billionaire Paul Allen tried to get corporate welfare for his new sports stadium.

The stunningly costly and belligerent antics of entrenched public fossils like Comrie and Galanter are pretty routine on the decks of the Ship of Fools that is City Hall. That is why it is crucially important that voters be given the chance to dramatically reform City Hall if they see fit—not just to dumbly accept the more modest compromise pushed by Chemerinsky, Butcher, Kayden, and the *Times*.

This week, the profound power struggle between the voter-bashing compromisers and the more serious reformers led to temporary chaos. First, on Monday the Elected Charter Reform Commission voted to back the less reformist compromise *but only if voters are given a choice on the ballot to also approve the four most disputed reforms*, including allowing the mayor to fire department heads, creating elected neighborhood councils, and drastically reducing the size of City Council districts. Then, the City Council-appointed reform commission set a meeting for Wednesday, apparently to slam the elected reform commission for trying to give voters a real choice.

To sum up, the elected commission was created by L.A. voters to clean the mess in City Hall. Its reform plan accomplishes that goal. The appointed commission was created by the City Council to clean *some* of the mess in City Hall *but to resist major reform of the Council itself*. Its compromise plan accomplishes *that* goal.

Is anybody still unclear? To *really, really, ultrasum up* (voters can put this paragraph in their wallets), the elected commission's reform plan will clean up the mess. The appointed commission's reform plan will clean up only *part* of the mess.

Got it? Anybody feeling confused?  
I didn't think so.

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*Corrections and counterattacks:* My December 10 column recounted an allegation that former *L.A. Times* editor Shelby Coffey ordered reporter Bill Knoedelseder to stop writing about MCA's ties to the Mob. In fact, Knoedelseder says, nobody asked him to stop, and his departure from the *Times* was unrelated to his MCA coverage.

Due to an editing error, my response to a letter from writer Mike Davis was not published. My response follows:

Davis claims that I was too lazy to interview him for my column, which unveiled extensive falsehoods in his book, *Ecology of Fear*. As with many other claims in his bizarre letter, this is a lie. I arranged an early morning telephone interview with Davis, and he stood me up. After that, Davis refused to return my several calls. As for the rest of his letter, Davis sets up various "claims" he says I made in my column, then righteously strikes them down. In truth, most of those "claims" were *not* published in my column, which stands as is. (And a note to *Times* reporter Nora Zamichow, who liberally quoted my column in a front-page thumbsucker: Nora, *nowhere* in my column do I resort to "quoting an ex-wife" of Davis. I accept your apology for such a breathless whopper.) 