

Peter Skerry

ON EDGE: BLACKS AND MEXICANS IN LOS ANGELES

After fifteen years with Tom Bradley as mayor, neither group is getting much out of politics.
Yet what are the alternatives?

On a recent Sunday morning, Mayor Tom Bradley arrived at the First A.M.E. Church in South-Central Los Angeles just as the eight a.m. service was beginning. As he stood next to the Rev. Chip Murray, waiting for the organ, drums, and electric guitar to finish a rousing gospel number, the Mayor's discomfort was evident. With the choir behind him, and the entire congregation clapping and swaying to the music, the six-foot-four Bradley didn't budge. It seemed to me, the only white among these middle-class blacks, that the Mayor and I felt about equally out of place.

My suspicions were confirmed when Bradley spoke. With unintentional irony, he declared, "This place rocks, and if you don't feel it, then you'd better have yourself checked out." He went on to strike a defensive tone, urging his listeners "not to believe everything you read in the papers." He cited his efforts in behalf of the homeless and explained his role in the redevelopment of the black Crenshaw district, much criticized as primarily benefiting white developers. He had little to say about the two issues everyone else in Los Angeles has been addressing—drug abuse and gang violence. Yet as the Rev. Murray's introduction made clear, Bradley was there seeking support for a fifth term at City Hall, though election day was a year and a half away. The Mayor left immediately after his talk to visit nine other congregations that morning. He was followed at the podium by a woman soliciting contributions to the United Negro College Fund and a young man selling burial insurance.

Bradley is in trouble. His problems with former liberal allies over his support for coastal oil drilling and other pro-development positions have become increasingly obvious. The emergent slow-growth movement scored a

big coup last spring by defeating the City Council president, long closely identified with the Mayor. Overlapping with this challenge has been Jewish disaffection with what is regarded as Bradley's lack of zeal in denouncing Louis Farrakhan, who continues to hold well-attended rallies in Los Angeles. Moving on this and on the environmental front, Zev Yaroslavsky, an aggressive young city councillor representing a heavily Jewish Westside district, has been challenging his former ally and will almost certainly run against him in 1989. So after fifteen years of staunch support for one of the nation's most prominent black politicians, Jews in Los Angeles now seem to feel that it's their turn to run City Hall.

Yet problems closer to home brought the Mayor to the black churches that

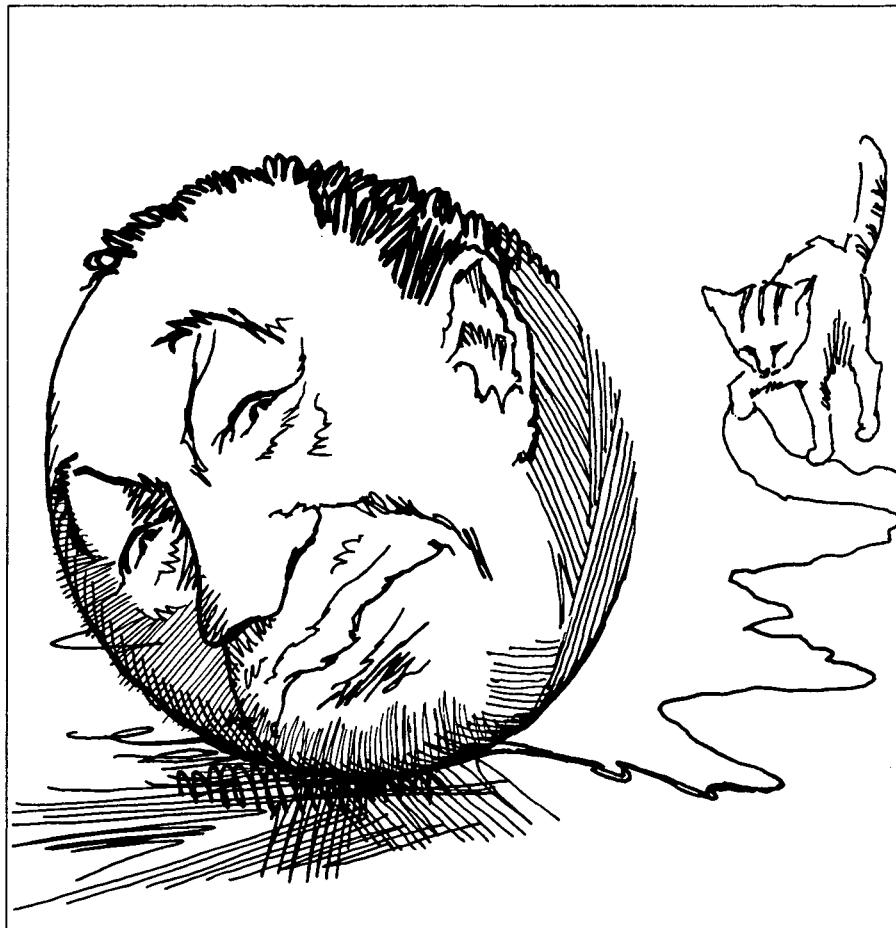
Sunday. For among all sectors of the black community, there is open disaffection with Bradley. "He's been so busy being Mayor of all the people that he's forgotten his own," says a young NAACP official. Such critics acknowledge that with a black constituency totalling about 17 percent of the population, Bradley has faced constraints quite unlike black mayors in Atlanta, Detroit, or even Chicago. Nevertheless, in the same election last spring won by the slow-growth candidate, Bradley's hand-picked black candidate for a seat on the City Council was defeated by another black. And in 1986 Bradley's second attempt to become the nation's first elected black governor was a humiliating failure, with incumbent George Deukmejian capturing 61 percent of the vote. Bradley's earlier razor-thin loss to Deuk-

mejian in 1982 could be traced to a modest black turnout. Yet a *Los Angeles Times* analysis revealed that turnout for Bradley among Los Angeles blacks in 1986 was substantially lower than in 1982.

Black discontent, however, is not focused on the Mayor alone. Last spring the respected five-term school board member and current board president Rita Walters, a black originally elected as a pro-busing candidate, was challenged—unsuccessfully—by the youthful head of the local Southern Christian Leadership Conference, who styles himself a "progressive." And this fall City Councillor Robert Farrell, who has represented his South-Central district since 1974, had to beat back an unusual recall challenge.

Despite such rumblings, I was somewhat taken aback when a black labor leader confided to me, "You know, the best black politician in Los Angeles is Kenny Hahn." Many other black leaders to whom I spoke agreed, however reluctantly, with this assessment of the sixty-eight-year-old white politician who has represented South-Central and Watts on the powerful Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors since 1952. Though the Supervisor's ceaseless efforts on behalf of constituents are occasionally dismissed as "paternalistic," whites and blacks are in awe of the man. A master politician of the LBJ, come-let-us-reason-together school, Hahn is regarded as the one man who can get the various leaders of the black community to sit down together at a prayer breakfast and resolve their differences. And when pressed, black leaders also admit that Hahn is so effective in part because as a white he is subject to much greater scrutiny—and held to greater accountability—than his black colleagues.

Much of the discontent comes from young blacks resentful that the older, established politicians haven't done more



Peter Skerry is a research fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.

to develop new talent. Thus Bradley has been criticized for not supporting a new face for that opening on the City Council last spring. He chose instead to go with an old friend from the police department, who then lost to another veteran black politico. In a political system whose few points of entry are highly visible offices requiring enormous campaign funding, the age and prolonged tenure of the black political establishment in Los Angeles is an irritant to young aspirants. After ten years on the City Council, and nearly fifteen as mayor, the seventy-year-old Bradley shows no signs of retiring. Throughout that twenty-five-year period, Gilbert Lindsay, at eighty-six the dean of black politicians in Los Angeles, has served on the City Council, and eighty-year-old Augustus Hawkins has represented his Watts district in Congress. Even the second tier of younger black elected officials in Los Angeles—individuals like Watts Assemblywoman Maxine Waters, an early and ardent supporter of Jesse Jackson; City Councillor Farrell; and School Board President Walters—are in their fifties and have served in their present offices for nearly a decade or more. Impatient, many ambitious young blacks have pursued opportunities in business and the professions, leaving the ranks of the next generation of black political leaders rather thin.

For all these reasons, many blacks in Los Angeles are questioning whether their political gains have been more apparent than real. Certainly to an outside observer there is a lack of organizational life among blacks in L.A. today. In part this is because the two ministers' associations that long played an important role in the community have fallen into disarray. But it is also striking that no umbrella organization capable of defining a common black agenda was put together in the city until 1979. There is a feeling, then, of suddenly waking up and wondering what's been going on since the 1965 Watts riots brought so much attention to their community. After fifteen years of a black mayor perceived as heavily indebted to whites, blacks in Los Angeles now sense they have been deceiving themselves.

Another source of disquiet for black Angelenos is the competition from huge numbers of immigrants. In many respects relations between blacks and Asians, especially Koreans, whose entrepreneurial efforts in black neighborhoods are daily sources of humiliation, are more difficult than those between blacks and Hispanics. Yet the more widespread and profound threat comes from Hispanics, especially Mexicans who, though slowed by the Simpson-Rodino immigration bill, continue to arrive in large numbers. And as these newcomers displace the residents of

once all-black neighborhoods, conflicts of culture and interest are much in evidence.¹

Such strains have already emerged in Compton, a small city of 93,000 inhabitants just south of Watts. Much of Compton's predicament is evident as one drives down narrow rutted streets of shabby bungalows adorned with security grates and laundry spread to dry on bushes. The county courthouse in downtown Compton has more

Much of the discontent comes from young blacks resentful that the older, established politicians haven't done more to develop new talent.

security—metal detectors, guards, plexiglass shields—than your average airport. Once a blue-collar white suburb, Compton turned black and is now experiencing a massive influx from Mexico. In 1986, enrollment in the public schools was about 60 percent black and 40 percent Hispanic—a six percent Hispanic increase, and a corresponding black decrease, over the previous year. With a murder rate twice that of the City of Los Angeles, Compton's Hispanic merchants, many of whom speak little English, have banded together to hire security guards for protection. Battles between black and Hispanic youths, say local clergy, are routine. Meanwhile, black homeowners resent the over-crowding and language problems presented by people they regard as johnnies-come-lately.

These tensions have spilled into the political arena, leading to squabbles over whether Catholic priests or Protestant ministers should offer the invocation at city council meetings. Hispanics protest that despite their numbers they have no representatives on the five-member council, and only one on the seven-member school board. They also complain that only 14 percent of Compton school employees are Hispanic. Meanwhile, several black elected officials in Compton, including the mayor, are accused in the *Los Angeles Times* of blatant nepotism and shady dealings with developers.

Compton is frequently cited by Angelenos as an example of the combustible nature of black-Hispanic relations. But as yet the level of tension

¹Of course, research at the Urban Institute has been widely reported as minimizing the labor market competition between Mexicans and blacks in Los Angeles. Yet such findings do not argue there is no competition whatsoever. Left unanswered therefore is the political question: how much competition is too much?

there remains atypical of the relative calm that pervades Los Angeles generally. Perhaps this is because the small municipality's highly personal, corrupt politics aggravates the social and economic strains contained by the impersonal, professional politics dominating the wider metropolitan area.

To be sure, tensions can be discovered just beneath the surface in greater Los Angeles. As a Mexican-American political operative commented about this article: "So you're going to blow the lid on our coalition

black and Mexican-American elected officials work together harmoniously. For example, City Councillor Gloria Molina has close ties to Watts Assemblywoman Maxine Waters, going back to Molina's days as a Sacramento aide and then an assemblywoman from East Los Angeles. City Councillor Richard Alatorre also served in the Assembly, where he was part of black Speaker Willie Brown's leadership team and handled, among other delicate assignments, the 1980 redistricting.

But such ties cannot be attributed simply to the accidents of personal history. They are also explained by the lack of constraints imposed on these elected officials by their largely unorganized, passive constituents. This is especially true of the Mexican-American politicians: registration figures assembled by the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project indicate that only about a third of *eligible* Hispanics in Los Angeles County are registered to vote. Low registration levels among upwardly mobile Mexican-Americans in the working-and lower-middle-class suburbs east of Los Angeles suggest that this group is too busy trying to make it economically to bother with politics.

What are we to make of this political passivity? Some have argued that minority groups would be prudent to eschew politics in favor of social and economic advancement. But in Los Angeles, such a view seems unreasonably optimistic. For a great deal of what we're seeing among blacks and Mexican-Americans here is simply a response to a political system hostile to the organization of low-income voters.

For their part, blacks of course resent that Mexicans can "pass"; or, as one black preacher put it, "they can walk the Anglo walk and talk the Anglo talk." Yet to a remarkable degree,





Staunton Hill

A Historic Setting For
SEMINARS•HOLIDAYS•RETREATS



Staunton Hill is no ordinary conference center. Designed in the Gothic Revival style by architect-builder John Evans Johnson for Charles Bruce in 1848, it has been in the Bruce family for 140 years. Guest wings designed by William Adams Delano were added by Ambassador David K.E. Bruce in 1933.

Guests at Staunton Hill—from the Confederate Cabinet during the Civil War to Secretary of State Dean Acheson in the Truman Administration—have enjoyed traditional Virginia hospitality in the rural peace of Charlotte County. The estate has 275 acres of grounds, an outdoor swimming pool and jacuzzi, tennis and racquetball courts; shooting is available on the property and golf and horseback riding are a few minutes' drive away.

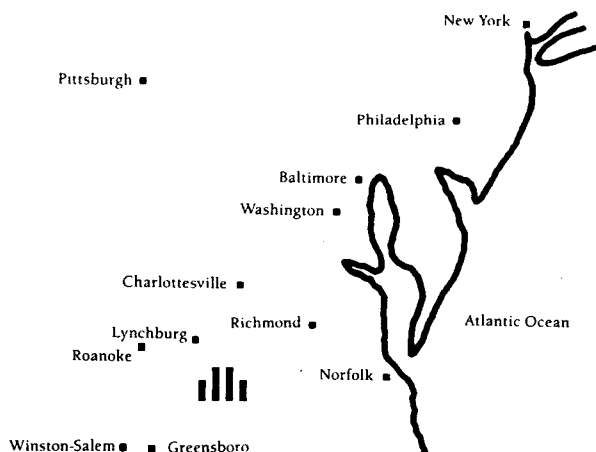
The main house is furnished in a rich combination of European, American and Oriental styles. Together with its wings and estate cottages, it has twenty-five guest rooms, most with private baths. Also on the property are five spacious meeting rooms, suitable either for small informal conferences, or more elaborate group presentations.

Staunton Hill features a full commercial kitchen; our cooks and staff will be glad to assist in menu planning and preparation.

We pride ourselves on our flexibility, and will do our utmost to meet your needs—whether for a single night's stay for a small gathering, or an extended visit for a group of twenty-five.



Please call us at 804/376-2718 for further information, (video cassettes and brochures) or write to: Victor Smither, manager, Staunton Hill Farm, Rte. 2 Box 44, Brookneal, VA 24528.



This should be no surprise, for the Progressive reformers who shaped California's modern political institutions on the eve of World War I sought to prevent the formation of ethnic, working-class machines then evident in cities of the East and Midwest. The legacy of those reforms is California's issue-obsessed politics, fueled by expensive media and direct mail campaigns.

Deprived of patronage and strong political parties, poor blacks and Mexicans in Los Angeles are at a double disadvantage. They may have mailboxes and own televisions, but they lack the enormous resources necessary to organize for political ends. And without the party organizations unsophisticated voters need to guide them, such individuals are confused and alienated, rather than mobilized, by issue politics.

Unfortunately, the resulting political vacuum does not go unfilled, especially among blacks, whose leaders seem irretrievably committed to a political solution to the group's problems. As for Mexican-Americans, those eager to identify them as the latest immigrant group about to assimilate into the American mainstream should be cautious. For it is easy to overlook that even the most successful assimilation engenders pain and confusion which make fertile ground for the faddish political movements that characterize California's political history—and indeed that increasingly characterize American politics generally.

Conservatives often need to be reminded that man—including black and brown man—is a political animal, and that politics cannot be defined as a luxury reserved for the affluent. This is particularly true in today's post-affirmative action environment, in which an aggressive press and a political culture that have come to accept notions of group rights look for, and, if necessary, create minority-group spokesmen and elected officials.

The problem, as we know, is that such spokesmen and officials frequently do not accurately represent their constituents' views. To illustrate the point, take the election last May of Lucille Roybal Allard to the State Assembly from an East Los Angeles district carved out as a Mexican-American seat by California Democrats in the 1980 reapportionment. The daughter of veteran Mexican-American Congressman Ed Roybal, the forty-five-year-old Mrs. Allard had never before run for office, and her decision to contest an open Assembly seat caught local politicians by surprise. But with her father's help, she raised \$108,000—five times more than her closest competitor—and captured 62

percent of the mere 8800 votes cast.

The political vacuum in Los Angeles might also be filled with rhetoric and charismatic leadership. Historically, blacks have been especially susceptible in this regard. In Los Angeles, as elsewhere, the issues become emotional ones, such as South Africa—though as an activist preacher admitted to me, "South Africa is an important issue, but what does it do for my neighborhood?" Much more disturbing rhetoric was heard in Los Angeles late last summer when black leaders demanded the dismissal of a municipal court magistrate who, in the course of proceedings against a white accused of a racially motivated attack on a black, had innocently repeated someone else's use of the word "nigger" in court.

Much black rhetoric these days concerns self-reliance. In part a response to the stringencies of the Reagan years, this theme seems to have particular resilience in Los Angeles, where it clearly strikes a chord with politically ambitious young blacks eager to assert themselves against their elders. But self-reliance is also the lesson blacks in Los Angeles derive from recurrent disputes with Jews over Farrakhan. As a young black attorney on her way up told me, "Blacks have learned the hard way about parasitic relationships with whites—er, Jews." It may be difficult to disentangle the idea of black self-reliance from certain impulses toward anti-Semitism. Says a widely respected Watts community leader about the prospects of Bradley losing the mayor's office to Yaroslavsky: "I can organize more people and get them more riled up to go downtown and demonstrate against Zev than I can Tom."

Such political dynamics give one pause about the future of Los Angeles. The possibility of spontaneous conflicts between blacks and Mexican-Americans cannot be dismissed. One source of trouble might be the black and Hispanic gangs, whose notorious violence has thus far—miraculously—not crossed racial or ethnic boundaries. So far (outside Compton, at least) black gangs have been killing blacks, and Hispanic gangs Hispanics. Then, too, the 1990 reapportionment will force the strains between blacks and Mexicans into the open. In 1980 these were contained by the Democratic leadership, and blacks lost no seats. But after a decade of heavy Hispanic immigration, black losses will be difficult to avoid. Under such scenarios today's black and Mexican-American politicians, lacking strong bases in their communities, would be poorly situated to influence events. And the freedom from accountability that up to now has permitted them to finesse or ignore such tensions would translate into irrelevance. □

Reid Buckley

DOES THE POPE LOVE AMERICA?

In the wake of *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, conservatives are crying "foul!" But during his visit to the U.S. last fall, John Paul left hints they missed.

Choirs of cacophony, not angels, proclaimed the good news of John Paul's second visit to the United States this past September. Those today who most earnestly and, in cases, viciously protest the Roman Catholic pontiff are not fundamentalists like Bob Jones, nor even Ku Klux Klanners. They are (in order of fanaticism) feminists, homosexuals, and assorted *soi-disant* Catholics who persist in so styling themselves though they "dissent" from some of the Church's fundamental doctrines, such as the sinfulness of premarital sex, the prohibition against contraceptives, and the absolute outlawing of abortion. The most bitter and intractable of these protesters might be epitomized by the lapsed nun of lesbian inclinations whose milk of humankindness is curdled because Church law does not permit her to be ordained. The most frenetic and non-plussed of his antagonists are the network intelligentsia.

Those folk do not understand the phenomenon of John Paul at all. Of last fall's visit Tom Brokaw of NBC gloomily predicted (just as the Alitalia version of *Shepherd One* was touching down) that it would be fraught with "confrontation" on account of the Holy Father's "traditional views." His brethren of the tube kept asking, rhetorically and of others, Will not the Pope cut and trim just a teensy bit on the doctrinal issues to accommodate his "restive" flock? Oh, they were a scream. They cannot really credit someone who will compromise neither jot nor tittle. They don't know how to handle—indeed, what to think of—this man who has been elevated to the status of Pope, because he does not traffic

in, and cares nothing for, Gallup polls. He is addressed as "His Holiness," a courtesy that they unctuously observe. He is—his miter proclaims him—*Vicar of Christ* (an incomprehensible status, an impossible claim, a stumbling block and an absurdity to Messrs. Jennings and Rather and Brokaw), whose (Christ's) truth cannot be trimmed by human agency. But surely . . .

ABC featured a "Special Report" that night, in which anchorman Peter Jennings explained why American Catholics, once so docile to the dictates of the Vatican, are today so rebellious. When Catholics stemmed mostly from immigrant families, their religious identity marked them: they were uneducated, ignorant, and servile. Now: they are mainstream Americans. Upwardly mobile. Educated. And therefore—the inference—no longer peasant-stupid submissive to archaic moral doctrines imposed from on high. (This pop analysis was echoed on the other television

channels: ill-educated, unsophisticated, primitive folk—you know, like Juan Valdez, who picks Folger coffee beans in Colombia—are John Paul's kind of Catholic.)

It's easy to ridicule the superficiality of media types, which is to ridicule them for filling the mold their telegenic profession requires. The only people in our society who understand John Paul less are intellectual Roman Catholic liberal-democratic defenders of the capitalist system by which we flourish, whom, with his recently published encyclical, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* ("The Social Concerns of the Church"), he has smitten. Because they—we right-wingers—have mislaid the meaning of liberty, the social and political right of self-determination, which derives from the precious gift of free will. In that gift inhered moral obligation.

"The only freedom that truly can

satisfy is the freedom to do what we ought. . . ." This, said the Pope in his rejoinder to President Reagan's words of greeting in Miami, is the freedom that sets us free. And these words he repeated on the morrow to the students of the University of South Carolina, of whom 98 percent (or something) hail from Protestant homes, and of whom probably 80 percent debauch on all available occasions, and of whom maybe 1 percent understood what he was talking about, yet who cheered him wildly. From the first hour of his visit, the Pope gave every signal that indeed he was not going to bend Church teaching to accommodate happy Protestant pagans or bitterly estranged Catholics, also in many cases pagan. He came on an ecumenical mission. But he was here first of all to evangelize that increasing near-majority of his flock who are sorely in need of instruction in the tenets of their faith and in complex teachings on moral and sexual and also social-philosophical issues. John Paul was on a mission to his own, his faithful, who help to constitute and, merely by choosing to exist in it, to an indefinable degree tolerate and condone a society that he has no illusions about.

John Paul, you see, was on a mission to another group also of Peter Jennings's acculturated, educated, and sophisticated Catholics—good folk, decent and moral folk, who pledge their intellectual allegiance to the grave errors against charity and justice irremediably at the root of our society, which is its irredeemable (*pace* Michael Novak and George Gilder) materialism. He was here not only wielding a sword of contradiction, but wielding it in rebuke.

At the planeside ceremonies in Miami that night, President Reagan quoted (stumbling so badly over the pronunciation of the name that it was painfully evident he had never himself read the man) Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain on the Constitution, whose



Reid Buckley is a novelist and founder of the Buckley School of Public Speaking. His latest encyclical, *Speaking in Public: Buckley's Technique to Winning Arguments and Getting Your Point Across*, will be published this spring by Harper & Row.