

# The minority mozaic in California politics



LOS ANGELES MAYOR TOM BRADLEY

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SACRAMENTO—When Ronald Reagan occupied the governor's mansion here only eight years ago, California was still the model of an Anglo-American state, noted for its spread-out suburbs, alternative lifestyles and high-tech economy. Today, thanks to immigration, a drop in the Anglo birth rate and a booming Latino birth rate, the real California is a world away from the still familiar surroundings of the presidential ranch at Santo Barbara.

Since the Reagan days, the population mix has changed dramatically. Hispanics are now the largest minority and will make up 51 per cent of the state by the year 2000. In the 1970s, more Chinese and refugees from Southeast Asia chose California for their new homes than any other state, changing the human landscape of scores of neighborhoods and small towns overnight. The biggest jump recorded in the last census was among Pacific Islanders, while the number of Filipinos has grown more than 160 per cent in ten years. California — no longer New York — is the melting pot state: a full quarter of the nation's foreign-born live here.

Together with the substantial community of blacks, who have become more politically adept in recent years, the sheer numbers of third world arrivals and long-time minority residents mean an Anglo political candidate is no longer the surest bet. In a number of small towns in the Central Valley, Chicano slates have captured control of local governments and boards of education. Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley, who is black, governs the state's largest city, where the school population is now 75 per cent non-white. The large and economically important Asian community remains without much electoral influence, the least visible minority in the political spectrum. Nevertheless, certain local Chinese leaders have tried — unsuccessfully this year — to persuade Secretary of State March Fong Eu to run for governor.

The current Democratic Party gubernatorial primary is only the most obvious example of this developing mozaic, leading up to an election that might well put the country's first black governor in the seat so recently occupied by the president. Aggressive registration drives are taking place in the *barrios*, throughout Chinatowns and other minority neighborhoods that comprise this "other" face of California. In the June 8th primary, which Mayor Bradley is expected to win handily, one of his main

and races — Mario Obledo is running with all the risky candor of the darkhorse. He's not seriously expected to threaten Bradley, but by running a decidedly ethnic campaign, Obledo is striking chords among minority voters, especially those Latinos who feel they have too long been relegated to a second class status.

"After 1948 (when California passed from Mexican to US hands) we were demolished socially, politically and economically," Obledo said in an interview. "We were made to feel inadequate as a people. We have the assets and the history and made the contributions, but the last time an Hispanic held statewide office in California was over 100 years ago . . . and this is supposedly the most enlightened state in the nation."

Obledo acknowledges he is running a campaign "addressed to the traditional non-voter." Latinos have the lowest voter turn-out record among California's cultural groups, and much of Obledo's campaign has been aimed at increasing registration.

In fact, Obledo seems less to be running for governor than using the governor's primary race to heighten political and ethnic awareness among fellow Hispanics. Recent events have underscored his self-styled champion's role: In the wake of highly-publicized job sweeps by the Immigration and Naturalization Service aimed at finding undocumented workers, and a probe by the US attorney of persons requesting bilingual ballots, Obledo emerged as one of the strongest voices condemning the federal

actions on the part of anxious minorities. And contrary to the official US stand, Obledo came out squarely for Argentina in the Malvinas dispute. "We ought to stick together in this hemisphere," he said.

If third world candidates are operating here now with legitimacy and a fair chance of winning, it does not mean that among themselves minority groups are unified, or that the specter of racial politics won't rise again. Obledo, for instance, at times has attempted to use conflicts between Latinos and blacks to undercut some of the support Tom Bradley has gained among Hispanics. Bradley, in turn, in his developing embrace of California agribusiness, has created fears that he will be far less a supporter of Cesar Chavez' farmworkers than his

Anglo predecessor, Jerry Brown. And when Bradley faces either Mike Curb or George Deukmejian as his Republican opponent in November, there is some fear the election might well witness a reversion to covert racial themes reminiscent of early campaigns.

Yet Tom Bradley remains the front-runner, not just for June but November as well. And Mario Obledo, despite his poor showing in the polls, has accomplished his primary task: gaining some credibility for a Latino candidate for higher office. Whatever the outcome of California's campaign '82, it's clear that politically and demographically the Golden State will never again be the same as when a former actor on the way to the White House held sway.

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challengers is another minority candidate, Mario Obledo, Governor Jerry Brown's former Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, a Latino who has developed a vociferous, though long-shot, challenge. Obledo sees himself as representing the state's increasingly visible Latino population, campaigning on a platform of parity for minorities — especially Latinos — in state government.

Tom Bradley's campaign minimizes any sense of racial politics, yet he successfully conveys the potent image of the great American success story: from son of an Alabama share-cropper to a powerful politician whose constituency today includes minorities, white liberals and environmentalists, and, most significantly, the southern California corporate community — bankers, lawyers and the chief executive officers of the key multinationals so prominent in the southland's business world. Perceived as a winner, he has made substantial inroads among the business elite in the north of the state, and even among the politically potent agricultural barons.

It was a different story when Tom Bradley first ran for mayor of Los Angeles in 1969 against incumbent Sam Yorty. Then he had little corporate support and was subject to what one candidate called "the dirtiest, most vicious election in LA history." Against a background of racist dirty tricks, Bradley lost.

Within four years, however, Bradley had successfully put together the first of his winning coalitions, adding an environmental constituency and a better showing among Latinos. Today, after eight years in office, the mayor is extraordinarily popular with his key corporate constituency, yet maintains his liberal cachet and the image that has become his most significant political weapon: that of the black candidate who is not perceived as a threat by Anglo voters.

In fact, as the primary campaign draws to a close, Bradley increasingly appears to represent the old minorities, who largely have melted in and whose most visible concerns are now indistinguishable from the familiar concerns of the establishment. Mario Obledo, meanwhile, may be speaking for those minorities who believe wholeheartedly in the American way and institutions, but who also say, "Yes, we are different, we don't intend to melt in or melt away, but we intend to participate, as well."

If Bradley's campaign pronouncements are restrained sometimes to the point of vagueness, attempting to project the image of the man for all seasons —

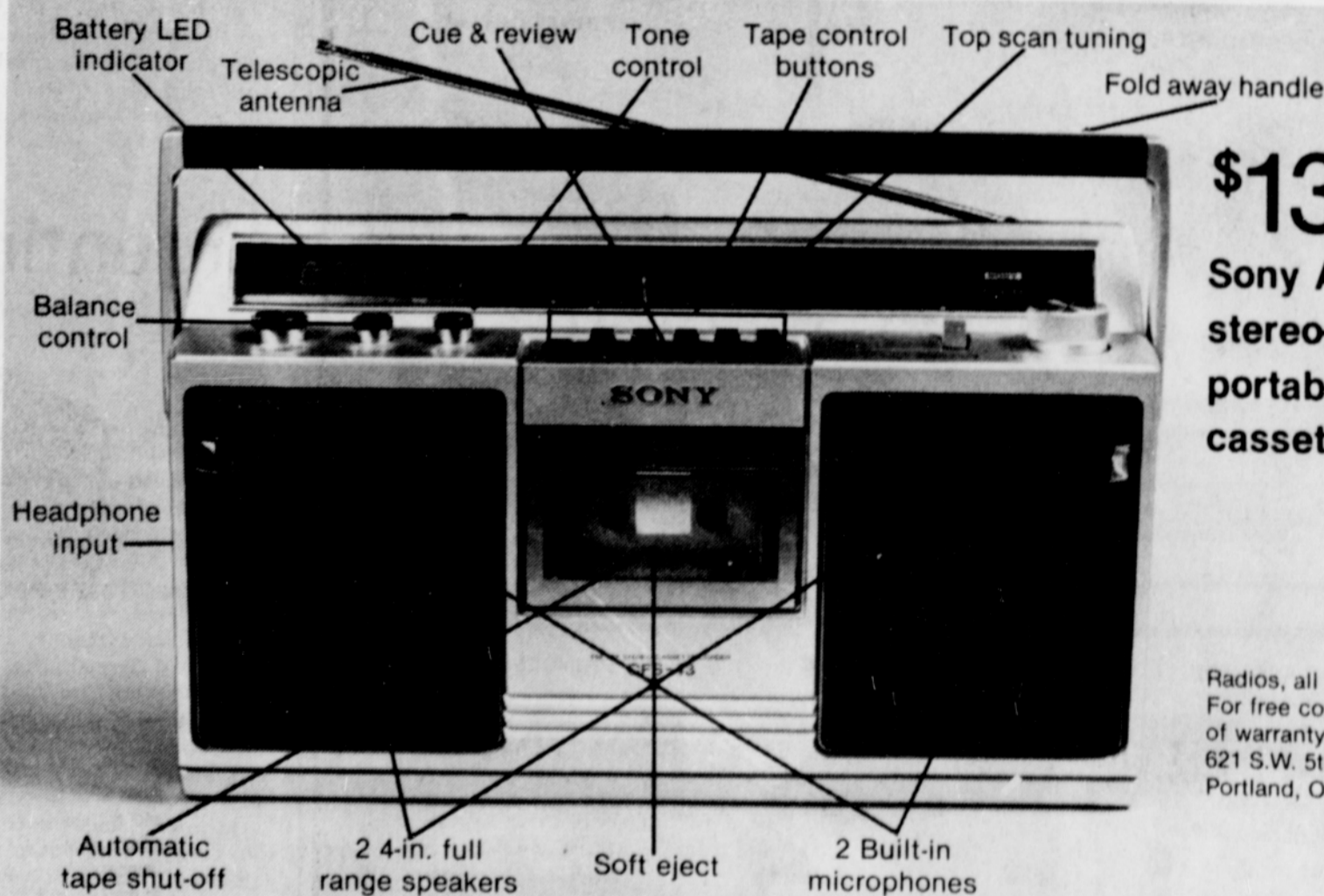
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