

Mr. Schwarzenegger Talks!

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TO GO STRAIGHT to the inevitable movie metaphor, Arnold Schwarzenegger bombed in his long-awaited premiere as would-be governor. In the two weeks since his "Tonight Show" announcement that he would run in the California recall election, Mr. Schwarzenegger had pretty much disappeared. This generated a good deal of justified grouching that he was light on specifics and wanted to say as little as possible in the scant two months between announcement and voting. Mr. Schwarzenegger's first news conference as a candidate, therefore, grew into an event on the order of "Garbo Talks!"

Mr. Schwarzenegger has some attractive qualities -- and we don't mean his biceps. His leanings on social issues -- his support for abortion rights and gay rights, his interest in after-school programs -- are in tune with most Californians. They could make a winning package when combined with fiscal conservatism and independence from the special interests (labor unions, trial lawyers, Indian gaming) that have a seeming chokehold on many state Democrats. If, that is, the candidate also has the expertise and realism to tackle the state's dire economic problems. But anyone hoping to hear evidence of such qualifications from Mr. Schwarzenegger Wednesday didn't come away reassured. Instead, they were treated to lines as useful as, "I will be a governor for the people for a change because, because I want to represent the people because the only thing that counts for me is the people."

Mr. Schwarzenegger all but ruled out tax increases, though his economic adviser, Warren Buffett, had -- entirely reasonably -- suggested to the Wall Street Journal last week that the state might need to revisit its cap on property tax increases. This created such a firestorm in a state where fealty to Proposition 13 is a political job requirement that Mr. Schwarzenegger joked, "I told Warren if he mentions Prop 13 one more time, he has to do 500 sit-ups." (Disclosure: Mr. Buffett serves on the Washington Post Co. board of directors. We're sure he could handle the calisthenics.) The candidate called for a constitutional cap on spending, though the last thing the state needs is another voter-imposed straitjacket -- such as that resulting from Mr. Schwarzenegger's previous political foray, an initiative on after-school programs that added \$550 million to state-mandated spending. At the same time, Mr. Schwarzenegger took education, which accounts for more than half the state's \$99 billion budget, "off the table" for spending cuts. So where, exactly, would he cut? "The public doesn't care about figures," he said. The state deficit stands at \$8 billion, which Mr. Schwarzenegger would raise to \$12 billion by repealing an increase in the car tax. Cuts big enough to close that gap will hurt real people -- poor people on Medicaid, or mentally ill people in group homes or maybe people victimized by criminals released early. Which people does Mr. Schwarzenegger have in his sights? Voters have a right to some idea.

Other would-be governors haven't offered much better. Republican Peter Ueberroth suggested he could bring in \$6 billion from a one-time tax amnesty -- a figure state

budget experts dismiss as pie in the sky. Same with the savings Mr. Ueberroth and Democratic Lt. Gov. Cruz Bustamante insist they can obtain by attacking fraud in state health care spending. Mr. Bustamante has outlined some specific tax increases -- on high-wage earners, on commercial property, on tobacco -- but his proposed spending cuts are gauzier. Meanwhile, Gov. Gray Davis's description this week of the recall as part of a "right-wing power grab" suggests that he still doesn't get the depth of public anger at his stewardship.

The people of California may have only themselves to blame for the recall mess. Even so they deserve better than what they've seen so far.

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