

CALIFORNIA SPLIT TROUBLED WATERS OVER THE PERIPHERAL CANAL DEBATE

By Spencer Michels

Imagine a border at the Tehachapis. As you drive north along Interstate 5, over the Grapevine, there'd be one of those official roadside signs: "You are entering North California. Population 10 million." And in the other direction, "Welcome to South California: Population 13 million."

Far-fetched? Politically impossible? Certainly. But it's a sure bet that should California voters approve the construction of the Peripheral Canal in June, angry Californians from the north will once again begin agitating for a split state, for an end to the unholy alliance that links the populous desert of Southern California with the water-rich paradise of the north.

The specter of that 43-mile long, billion-dollar ditch, created for the sole purpose of carrying northern water to the south, has stirred northern resentment to a degree unknown before in this state. And when northerners hear the total cost of all the authorized dams, canals and pumping stations that would eventually complete the state water project — a figure put at \$23 billion by the year 2035 — their northern blood boils. That kind of fury could well result in a populist drive to bust asunder the bonds linking north with south.

The only time such passions were aroused to an equivalent pitch was in 1859. Southern Californians, mostly of Spanish origin, wanted nothing to do with the Forty-Niners, who had flocked to the northern part of the state searching for gold. The southerners worried that the propertyless rabble of the more populated north would vote taxes on vast southern land holdings, which would be used to support a state government that would work mainly to benefit those living around Sacramento and San Francisco. Those southerners had fought statehood in 1850, preferring to remain a territory. But statehood came despite their efforts.

Nine years later, however, they

In the north it is perceived as a water grab.

nearly won their battle to separate from the north: The legislature and the governor gave in to their arguments of vast differences. The people of the south voted 2457 to 828 to cast themselves adrift from the land and people above the Tehachapis, and papers were sent to Congress for final approval — a

mere formality. But the Civil War broke out, and the division of California into two states was forgotten.

Today, it is the northerners who would like the divorce, and their outrage stems from what they perceive as a water grab, a bid by Los Angelenos to fill their swimming pools and sprout new subdivisions in their arid deserts, using northern water and ignoring the environmental consequences.

The debate over the Peripheral Canal should be, of course, more complicated, more well-reasoned than that. For one thing, about half of the water that would flow down the canal, when it is finished in the 1990s, will not get to Southern California at all. Rather, it

In the arid south it is considered a matter of survival.

will be used to irrigate crops in the naturally dry parts of the San Joaquin Valley, mostly on mammoth corporate farms in Kern County, which, according to traditional reckoning, is north of the Tehachapi Mountains and therefore part of Northern California.

Furthermore, there is a legitimate debate about what the canal will do to the water in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta and San Francisco Bay. There are those, including officials of the State Department of Water Resources, who argue that because of releases of fresh water from several points along the canal, the project will actually improve the quality of delta water and insure a salt-free supply to Contra Costa County. Or ponder the oft-cited argument that 40 percent of the states runoff flows, unused, out to sea through the rivers of the North Coast, water that could eventually be channeled into the Central Valley and used by man. The canal, it is argued, would be able to carry that water so it will serve a useful purpose.

But no matter. Even if there were not counter-arguments to those claims, northerners would still feel they were being cheated by a Peripheral Canal that will divert up to 80 percent of the flow of the Sacramento River into giant pumps near Tracy and, at great cost in energy, direct it south. What is the north getting in return? Kern County vegetables?

In the delta, where they've been getting essentially free water for nearly a century, ranchers worry that in drought years, they will lose control of their water. The canal, they say, will be used by powerful southern interests to dry up their delta. So those ranchers would certainly, and with some justification, interpret a state-wide vote to go ahead with the construction of the canal as an indication

Continued



that the south intends to run roughshod over their interests. The depth of distrust runs so deep that three dead delta farmers reached out from their graves and had their estates contribute to the anti-canal campaign. Obviously, the ranchers in the delta would be ripe for a movement to regain their long-held political influence over water; that is, a move to create a North California.

Perhaps even more receptive to a split would be that vast body of Northern Californians whose vaguely environmentalist hackles are raised by what they perceive as the cavalier attitudes of Los Angelenos toward the north. Nobody likes getting ripped off, especially while the whole world is watching, and yet that's what many northerners feel is happening.

With that in mind, three years ago State Senator Barry Keene of the North Coast introduced a bill in the state legislature to split the state. He wanted to create an Alta California. The bill got nowhere, and Keene now explains that it was a symbolic gesture:

"The people in Northern California tend to feel that they don't want Southern California as the paramount political decision maker, and they are not tremendously fond of the Southern California lifestyle. The north has a more laid-back lifestyle that they think ought to be independent of and insulated from the Southern California type of lifestyle." Somehow, differences over water get mixed with differences over lifestyle. And the result is a political frame of mind that is open to suggestions of a state-splitting divorce.

As Senate Bill 200 — the Peripheral Canal construction bill — passed the state legislature in 1980, a few Northern Californians began to agitate for a state split. A former Stockton assemblyman, Doug Carter, organized an initiative campaign to stop the canal and break California in two, and he was joined, not by other politicians, who saw the move as doomed to failure, but by a handful of citizens. San Francisco attorney Steve Pitcher says he enrolled and helped lead the fight "primarily because I don't think that California as a single government entity makes any sense. There are just too many differences between north and south: geography, politics, climate, lifestyle . . . We are just a thoroughly distinct people."

More receptive to the split would be that vast body of environmentalists whose hackles are raised by what they perceive as the cavalier attitudes of Los Angelenos toward the north.

But Pitcher understood that it was water and the governor's signing the Peripheral Canal bill that was the motivating force behind the movement: "People realized here in the north that no longer did they have any political control over their own resources, over the very fabric of their land. . . . It's a never-ending process," he says. "The Los Angeles area is a consuming giant that will drain north California of all its water eventually."

Probably partly because it was not staffed by professional politicians, the Two Californias Committee fell on its face. More influential in the committee's failure to gather signatures for an initiative was the simultaneous organization of a rival group with more backing and a single, less drastic purpose, which is embodied in its name — the Coalition to Stop the Peripheral Canal. That's the group whose first aim was to allow the people of California to vote on whether the canal should be built. They gathered a million signatures in their referendum drive, and now they're raising about \$2 million to defeat SB200 at the polls on June 8. The referendum is getting plenty of attention, while the move to split the state is waiting in the background. "I suspect a lot would coalesce if the referendum were to be defeated," Pitcher says today, while admitting that for the time being his Two Californias Committee has been abandoned.

The leaders of the anti-canal drive disclaim any serious interest in splitting the state. Ted Wellman of the Marin Conservation League says he's thought of it but considers it "just a gesture that always gets beaten down in Sacramento." And Ray King of the Coalition to Stop the Canal says that even if the referendum fails and the canal is approved, there are other important battles to be fought, like a water reform initiative that would

force conservation and reclamation of waste water.

At the Sierra Club, Carl Pope predicts that split-the-state will not become a big movement. And the anti-canal coalition's paid director, Doug Watts, says that not even the most radical opponent of the canal advocates a state split. "It's pie in the sky," he says, "like the move to eliminate income tax."

But all these conservationists admit that "out there" among the people of Northern California, there is plenty of talk about breaking up the state. They hear about it when they appear on radio talk shows, when they ride the elevator, when they walk down Montgomery Street. And they reluctantly and privately admit they see the kernel of dissolution sentiment in the sharp differences in opinion that show up in the polls when northerners and southerners are quizzed on the water issue.

The California Poll reports that over the past year northern opposition to the canal inched upward to 64 percent, whereas in the southland 57 percent of the population favored construction. Mervin Field, the poll's founder and author, calls the fight over the canal "one of the most polarized ballot measures in years."

Those arguments fly in the face of official pronouncements by both proponents and opponents of the canal who insist, like Governor Brown, that the canal should not be a north-south issue. Politically, that's the stand forced upon anyone who wants to appeal for votes in both the north and the south. And with \$5 million being poured into the campaign, both sides are trying to lure voters from around the state. But realistically, there is no issue that brings out the differences between north and south like the canal.

Its fate, at the polls anyway, won't be determined by calculations of acre-

feet of water used in Kern County, or the cost of energy to pump water over the mountains. The outcome of Proposition 9, the referendum measure, will not rest on whether the mile-long fish screen on the Sacramento River will work, or on the canal's potential for tapping North Coast river water, or even on what happens to California's bond rating if water bonds are sold.

Rather, the fate of SB200 rests on emotion: on whether Southern Californians fear they will go thirsty without more water, and on whether northerners are fed up with southerners using their superior numbers to steal water that God gave to the north. Even water experts realize that the oversimplified, emotional approach will outweigh their sophisticated arguments.

Northern frustration is a certainty should the canal measure pass. But where will it all lead?

In the past, with the single exception of the 1859 episode, efforts at state-splitting have not worked at all. The Constitution dictates that the legislatures of the states involved must approve division, and so must Congress, which, in turn, has traditionally required a showing that the people of the area desire separate statehood. Congress also has, in the past, wanted assurances that the new state could survive economically. There's not much question of that in California's case. But, politically, a split state would seem about as likely as a ban on campaign contributions. For even if northern legislators voted for two states, southerners would not, and there are more of them. And a governor would find such a measure difficult to sign, since his support comes from the south and the north. Furthermore, he wouldn't want to preside over a division.

The major differences between northerners and southerners have already split the state psychologically; Mother Nature has split it geographically, and Spanish exploration and the Yankee gold rush have split it historically. The Peripheral Canal is continuing that tradition, and so it will be small wonder if, a few months from now, the old split-the-state movement picks up converts who would happily campaign for a border, and for a sure-fire way to keep the south from controlling northern water. □