

## Our Indian Government

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Play at a casino, and elect a Republican

**While next week's noncontest** for governor draws about as much public attention as a wall of drying paint, something quite significant for the state's future is taking place beneath the surface. One of the richest and most powerful state lobbies has shifted allegiance from Democrat to Republican and is likely to help elect California conservatives next week — and potentially for years to come.

Unfortunately, the new — and unlikely — conservative ally is none other than those pesky and money-laden Indian gaming tribes. Four Southern California powerhouse casino tribes have now unloaded nearly \$10 million on their newly formed Team 2006 political committee. And at last count, 85 percent of their dollars have gone toward Republicans — a radical switch from previous cycles, when more than two-thirds of their contributions went to Democrats. The tribal funding is helping to resuscitate what would otherwise be a moribund California Republican Party.

A \$1 million chunk of Indian funding has supercharged the ultraconservative Tony Strickland's campaign for state controller. Northern California Republican Assemblyman Guy Houston is also being floated by gambling contributions. And Congresswoman Bonnie Garcia, the "hot-blooded" Republican who said she wouldn't kick Arnold out of bed, has gotten nearly \$300,000 from the Indians. Likewise, Republican state Senator Jeff Denham of Salinas picked up a half million in support, and San Diego GOP Assemblywoman Shirley Horton received \$259,000 from the tribes. Most of these contributions have come in the form of "independent expenditures" that have literally no limits on spending.

These jackpot payouts to the GOP are at least an indirect product of a very deft strategic move by Governor Schwarzenegger. You'll remember that Arnold helped get himself elected in 2003 by taking a hard line against the gaming tribes and demanding that they start paying taxes on their casino earnings. And a low-level war has since been simmering between the Governor's Office and many (but not all) of the tribes. Anticipating that the antagonistic tribes could leverage millions against him in next week's re-election bid, Arnold himself switched sides earlier this year and offered the tribes 22,000 more slot machines in exchange for tax rates lower than in his original plan.

The tribes jumped for the deal, but hit a roadblock in the Legislature. The new compacts with the Indians also did away with union rights that Arnold had once insisted upon. And under pressure from steamed-up unions, the Democratic Legislature torpedoed the tribal gaming-expansion deals. In short, the Democrats decided that — at least in the short run — organized labor was a more valued ally than the casino tribes.

By funneling their megafunding to Republicans this cycle, the gaming tribes are clearly trying to spook and intimidate the Democrats, hoping that when the new Legislature reconvenes, it will reconsider and rubber-stamp the casino expansions negotiated with the governor. "This is a statement, a warning shot," Ned Wigglesworth, a policy advocate for California Common Cause, which tracks campaign activity, told the media.

“What the tribes are doing with this war chest is challenging labor and sending a message to the Democratic Party.”

The tribes have already at least partially succeeded. Some key Democratic strategists — including Steve Maviglio (deputy chief of staff to Speaker Fabian Núñez) and longtime party consultant Garry South — have publicly and angrily reacted to the Indian ploy. Some Democrats have floated the idea of an Asian-American boycott of tribal casinos, given that Tony Strickland’s opponent in the controller’s race is Chinese-American John Chiang.

My own experience sitting at casino blackjack and poker tables is that this would be a pretty half-baked notion. My impression is that most slot and table-game players are not greatly moved by weighty political motivations.

**I have a simpler solution** to the political blackmail now being exerted by the tribes. How about if the Democrats just continue to say “no” to the totally unnecessary and absolutely excessive demands for casino expansion? It’s going to be hard for the Dems to wean themselves from gambling contributions. In the past, our Democratic legislators have paid off like haywire slot machines, pumping out one juicy political accommodation after another in return for tribal cash.

Now the tribes have done the Democrats, and possibly the voters, a wonderful favor by fully revealing that they are merely one more self-interested corporate lobby and that supporting them no longer has anything to do with civil rights, justice or historical reparations. A willingness by the tribes to saddle the state with a load of right-wing Republicans, who couldn’t give two nickels about the poor, only so the same tribes can plant tens of thousands more slot machines on their casino floors, qualifies them as a lobby that should be scorned and ignored.

It’s asking a lot from the Democrats. But even if California’s Indian-backed Republican candidates win their races, Democrats will retain full control over the Legislature. Will they have the gumption to hold fast next year and tell the GOP-friendly tribes no dice?