

PG&E kicks press out of debate

Guardian reporter escorted from event he was invited to

By Brady Welch, 02-03-10

It sounded like a great story: a representative of Pacific Gas and Electric Co. agreed to a public debate over the merits of a ballot initiative the company essentially had paid to place on the California ballot. The measure seeks to curtail public power and clean energy in the state. And so far, PG&E has been loathe to discuss it in any open forum.

But on Jan. 27, PG&E's political consultant, David Townsend, was scheduled to square off with state Sen. Mark Leno, a staunch foe of the measure, before what sounded like a great audience: the Northern California Power Agency, which represents 17 public power providers across the state.

At Sacramento's Doubletree Inn, I headed to the lobby of the California Ballroom, where I found a woman sitting at a table adorned with the logo of the NCPA. "I'm a reporter here to cover the debate between Sen. Mark Leno and a representative from PG&E," I said. "Would this be the right place?"

She smiled politely. Sorry, she said, you have to be an NCPA member and registered for the conference.

"I was invited by the senator," I told her.

"Then you will have to wait until he gets here," she said curtly.

I walked upstairs to the front desk — and just then, Leno walked through the main lobby's sliding doors. I introduced myself, walked with him to the conference room, and quickly slipped in with some other attendees. Within three minutes, a man sitting next to me was called to the side by a steward who whispered something to him, and then just as quickly, returned to his seat. He turned to me.

Are you with the media? he whispered.

"I'm with a newspaper," I said.

He then informed me that the conference was actually private, and sorry, I would have to leave. They would explain more outside.

After I was escorted out, Leno came up to me and explained that there had been a miscommunication. Turns out Townsend didn't want the media around. And worse, the NCPA folks appeared to be taking his side. Leno arranged for me to hear his opening statement, but that was all.

The senator's remarks were pointed. He noted that PG&E's proposed legislation is not an initiative, but an amendment to the state Constitution. He mentioned the curtailing of free enterprise and a demise of state government. He likened the utility's disrespect for the legislative process to a spit in the face, and at one point openly asked Townsend: "What good is your word?"

The political consultant, for his part, sat quietly. At times he rolled his eyes or bit his thumbs. When Leno was wrapping up, Townsend leaned over to the moderator and whispered something. The moderator then came over to me and said I'd have to leave.

So I walked out — but not without wondering: when exactly did PG&E hirelings get the right to exclude reporters from meetings filled with representatives of public agencies?

Leno himself wasn't sure. "With all due respect to David Townsend," he told the *Guardian* a few days later, "I don't see why a consultant wouldn't want to discuss the themes of his campaign in public. I

think his decision not to allow the press to hear him speaks for itself."

Despite multiple calls and e-mails, we couldn't get NCPA director James H. Pope to tell us why he lets PG&E determine who can — and can't — attend his sessions. Jane Cirrincione, NCPA's assistant general manager for legislative and regulatory affairs, told us that Townsend was invited by her boss and was not authorized to speak publicly for PG&E.

But Peter Scheer, director of the California First Amendment Coalition, offered a possible explanation. NCPA, he contends, "is capitulating to PG&E's demand for secrecy, not for ideological reasons, but simply because if the spokesperson walks, they don't have a conference. The reasons for excluding the press are basically that mundane and stupid."

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