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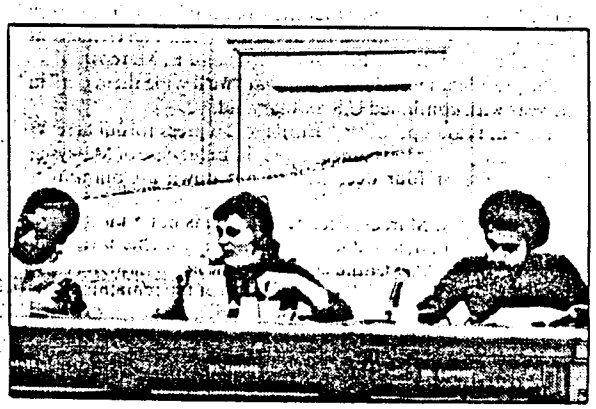

Left: BCA's 1982 slate, Veronika Fukson, Wesley Hester, John Brauer, Anna Rabkin, John Denton, seated Gus Newport. Right: April coalition councilmembers D'Army Bailey, Loni Hancock and Ira Simmons.

The BCA: from activism to office

Ten years of protest and initiatives led to council majority

By WILL MINER
and HOWARD LEVINE
STAFF WRITERS

It was just over a year ago that the revolution came to Berkeley. On election day 1984 — the day the rest of the country was re-electing Ronald Reagan in an avalanche — the people of Berkeley presented Berkeley Citizens Action with four new seats on the city council. The East Bay's answer to the Sandinistas gained a total of eight out of nine available seats on the council — and unquestionable control of the city government. The election brought to full fruit seeds that had been planted more than fifteen years before.

But the question was: just what fruit would be harvested in the next two years?

At the election night headquarters of the All Berkeley Coalition, the BCA's moderate political arch-rivals, news of the victory was greeted with muted gasps, moans and murmurs.

In the opinion of other, more conservative citizens of Berkeley, the election meant the inmates had finally taken over the asylum and it was just a matter of time before their madness would infect and possibly destroy the rest of the city.

Meanwhile at BCA election camp, the victors were jubilant. Many BCA members had been working 15 years for this moment — in the streets, on the campaign trail and through the initiative process — and they were impatient to finally make some real, fundamental, changes in their city.

During their first year in office, the BCA-dominated council passed a plethora of controversial new legislation: from domestic partner benefits to stiff controls on development. Political opponents, the mainstream national press, and even some BCA members were critical of the speed at which the council worked. But councilmembers and their supporters said they've been waiting for two decades for their chance and their agenda is long overdue.

This week, The Daily Californian will take a close look at the first year of BCA's dominance of the city council. Today's segment will look at the historical underpinnings of BCA; tomorrow their substantive achievements will be scrutinized. On Thursday we will focus on their style — how they did what they did; and Friday will bring a look to the future.

Ten Years Of Trouble

Prior to their 1984 victory, the BCA had been causing trouble in local politics for ten straight years, since immediately prior to Councilmember John Denton's 1974 bid for BART Board of Directors. But most of its early participants trace its origins even further back — to the April Coalition of the late '60s and early '70s, the Berkeley Coalition of the mid-'60s, and even to national protest movements prior to that.

First of four parts

Some trace it to the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) hearings, which came to San Francisco in 1960 to uproot communist infiltration in the Bay Area. Others say it began in the spring of 1964 with the sit-ins at San Francisco's Sheraton Palace hotel and auto row, where protesters demanded equality in jobs for blacks. Still others point to the Free Speech Movement in 1964 and the anti-war protests that followed.

"People began to make the connections between not spending $30 million a year bombing Viet Nam and being able to pay for rebuilding Berkeley and Oakland," said Loni Hancock, former April Coalition councilmember. "We used to say that the local is the only universal . . . it's the only part of the world that you can have real control over."

The civil rights movement, the Free Speech Movement and the anti-war movement "encouraged the development of a certain kind of program which was fairly radical for United States society, but not particularly radical for Berkeley," according to Sean Gordon, an aide to Berkeley Mayor Gus Newport.

For years, Berkeley had been a sleepy Republican college town, and, except for a liberal city council majority in 1961-1964, it would remain so until the mid-'70s.

Times a changin'

But in the years following the Free Speech Movement, more and more Berkeley residents began to take part in anti-war marches. And the city's Democrats — now a bigger majority of voters — split over efforts to unseat Berkeley's democratic but increasingly hawkish U.S. Rep. Jeffrey Cohelan, first with journalist Robert Scheer in 1966 and now-Alameda County Supervisor John George in 1968.

Although Scheer did not win, he carried the city of Berkeley, and afterward various community groups adopted his campaign framework to work on improving various city problems. They fought for a municipal child care program, increased public transportation, tree-lined streets, and traffic control.

But the "radicals" did not practice politics in any traditional manner. That is, they did not take losing gracefully and quietly go home to prepare for the next election. These were people who had cut their political teeth on grassroots-style, community organizing and they brought that same spirit to electoral politics by concentrating on the ballot initiative process.

Although BCA managed to pass ballot initiatives to stop rent hikes, control the police, and limit development in the flatlands, they felt they were being rendered ineffective by those moderates in power, and increasingly sought control of the city council.

Ying Lee Kelley, now an aide to Ron Dellums, also remembers the early days. "It really was a matter of people taking responsibility for their environment. And it was a broad thing, Spaceship Earth. So you had to maintain the spaceship in terms of what you ate and what you ejected in your little cubicle.

"So I think that the different attempts to run candidates, to push initiatives, had to do with running the city directly and bypassing the council, because we didn't have a majority on the council."

In 1967 the Community for New Politics ran a "radical" slate of candidates for city council, which included communist leader Bob Avakian, Ron Dellums and Jerry Rubin for mayor. Of that slate, only Ron Dellums, also endorsed by the more moderate Democratic Caucus, was elected. For the 1969 election, the Berkeley Coalition formed and ran UC Professor Charles Sellers and longtime peace and neighborhood activist Loni Hancock.

"It was a very exhilirating time," Hancock said. "We felt like things were possible that were never possible before . . . that all kinds of positive things could be accomplished."

THE DAILY CALIFORNIAN

BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA

History of the BCA party

FROM FRONT PAGE

From Vietnam to the city

But the movement didn't really coalesce until after the battles over People's Park, when students turned more attention toward the city.

"In the several days that followed (the People's Park rioting) we had a policeman with a shotgun on both corners of my block," Hancock recalled. "My younger daughter's nursery school was tear-gassed, causing terror among the children, many of whom thought they were dying because of their difficulty breathing . . . The city council refused to take steps to get the National Guard out of Berkeley, or to do anything to curb the police."

It was then that the traditional "outsiders" — radicals who didn't think in terms of partisan politics — felt events in Vietnam brought home and needed to establish a strong, legitimate political force here (see related story, Page 6).

Ron Dellums finally toppled Cohelan and became Berkeley's anti-war Congressional representative in November 1970. And for the spring city elections, in April 1971, community activists joined with hippies and students for the first time to form the April Coalition. The coalition ran two candidates for city council — Hancock and UC student Rick Brown — and the Berkeley Black Caucus chose D'Army Bailey and Ira Simmons (because at that time white progressives thought that blacks should choose their own candidates).

"We never did elect anyone to the council until we made a coalition," Hancock said.

A taste of success

Hancock, Bailey and Simmons all won (though Bailey eventually proved too volatile for the electorate's taste and was recalled), giving the coalition its first taste of success. The city's Democratic Caucus, deeply divided over the Viet Nam war, soon died out, with the Berkeley Democratic Club replacing it on the right, and the April Coalition remaining on the left. This party split has never healed.

Leo Bach, once a Berkeley Coalition member, is now among the BCA's most vociferous critics. He left the Berkeley Coalition when it became involved in what he calls the "politics of expedience," sacrificing policy commitments to personal, political gains.

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Bach cites as an example Ron Dellums' decision to run as a Democrat, when he seemingly disagrees with much of what the party stands for. "Dellums himself says he is a 'democratic socialist,'" Bach said.

Bach said the decision to change the name of the Berkeley Coalition to the April Coalition and then the April Coalition to BCA was a change "in name only." The "old lefties" had too much political baggage, according to Bach, and needed a new image to attract more voters.

Prior to the April 1973 election, the "pragmatic" and "ideological" factions of the coalition splintered somewhat, and the Republicans backed the Democratic "Berkeley Four" slate, knowing they could no longer elect their own candidates.

Another problem they faced was the looseness of their organization prohibited effective functioning except for short periods. When only Kelley was elected in '73, the April Coalition fell apart, never having gained the council majority they wanted.

Thus also began the flip-flop pendulum election pattern that would persist until 1984: the moderates and progressives would trade off alternating elections, with the progressives never achieving a majority.

But they found success on other fronts. They had great luck putting new laws and programs in place through citizen-approved initiatives, and in June 1972 the April Coalition victoriously sponsored the city's first rent control law. And in April 1973, voters passed the Neighborhood Preservation Ordinance — protecting the flatland neighborhoods from being overrun with apartment complexes — and the Police Review Commission.

"During those years I was working with the community on initiatives," said councilmember John Denton. "In fact, I guess it was sort of an anti-electoral approach.

"The idea was to change government through initiatives . . . I wasn't really interested in electoral politics . . . Because of the relationship between raising money and getting elected . . . that was one of the things that was so very attractive to me about the April Coalition, that it was able to generate big political power without big political money. We used to say kind of childish things like, 'We have feet, and they have dollars.'"

Marty Schiffenbauer, for years the BCA's initiative wizard, said "Initiatives stemmed from, one, recognition of the fact that you can't trust politicians. So they get elected and turn their back on you, which has happened all the time . . . Two, it's easier for people to vote on an issue which is before them."

"Basically the initiatives were to give space for political reform," Gordon said. "And all that time you're developing a body of attitudes and ideas from these different constituency groups in the coalition . . . but there's these themes that run through about open government, and using government on the part of people who don't have power, as opposed to the status quo 'chamber of commerce' style government you find in most small towns."

BCA is born

But the April Coalition had died, and, thinking they needed an ongoing organization if they were going to be able to accomplish their goals, members of the former April Coalition in 1974 formed the Berkeley Citizens Action. Although unsuccessful in running local environmentalist lawyer and neighborhood preservationist John Denton for BART board in 1974, the newly-christened BCA managed to win two candidates in 1975, splitting with the Berkeley Democratic club, which was running slates for political office for the first time.

"After '75," John Denton said, "there was the feeling that you really had to be at it all the time. You couldn't have these peaks and drop-offs. Also, we had developed quite an outreach to the community, and BCA was seen as a sort of continuing outreach."

The purpose of the Berkeley Citizens Action coalition was to work on a full-time basis, to keep the organization going so that it didn't have to be beaten back into shape for each election. But after the organization splintered over the 1977 slate, they got creamed in the elections and it was clear more needed to be done.

BCA hired a full-time director, began networking its various constituency-activist groups, and sought to establish itself as a more responsible group.

Taking control

"The majority of Berkeley voters supported BCA initiatives, but initiatives aren't as democratic as the city government," according to Berkeley's Assemblymember Tom Bates. "On the city council you have to deal with compromise, where the initiative process tends not to give them that freedom."

The solution: pass another initiative which moved council elections scheduled during presidential election years to November, when BCA knew the voters would come to the polls.

The result: BCA took three of four council seats and Newport was reelected in 1982, and in 1984, they took all four.

"Finally you have people taking office, and you have an agenda that's been under development for 20 years and that includes a lot of things that in most cities are extremely controversial," Gordon said.

"And you have all of these people who have been in opposition to the existing status quo government who now have to sort out what it means to have the power to do something that they've all been saying together that they all would do," he said.

BCA leader speaks out

Ying Lee Kelley, one of the driving forces behind BCA offers this personal statement of why she got involved in Berkeley politics.

In 1969 I had gotten a taste of what a militarized approach to problem-solving can be. As a schoolteacher at Willard Junior High School I brought my junior high school students, who were very interested in People's Park — we would talk about it and they would always say let's go over there and I would always say no, there are other priorities — finally they said, "c'mon, bring us" and I said "O.K. I'll take us as a class." And the day that we had planned the trip was Friday before the weekend. I took my kids down and we walked down Telegraph Ave. and there came — I had never heard of Dan Siegel before — but as it turned out, Dan Siegel, towards the park. And I was on the corner with my students when the hose and the fire hydrant was turned on. I retreated with my students. But we were really blocked in because the sheriffs were coming in from all sides. So we ducked in H. Salt Fish and Chips and there we stayed for the next hour and a half.

But I was outraged, of course, because I felt that this was my town. We knew that we'd been through violent actions — I mention that because as a consequence of my firsthand experience I turned on the television and saw Ronald Reagan calling in the National Guard, declaring it an emergency, and the troops were brought in. They had the troops and the tanks and the bazookas parked down at the marina, and when I heard *that* I really got discouraged because this was in the context of Viet Nam and that the acceptance of American military action in Southeast Asia was in some way accompanied by an allegory situation in the United States.

I remember turning on the TV and they flashed to the Berkeley city council, whose existence I hadn't much known about or cared about, and they went down the line, person by person, they spoke up and complained about the troops and the city council, until Ron Dellums spoke. I'd heard of him, and I heard him and saw him and I felt really, that someone was fighting. I think that was my first shock, seeing Ron Dellums.

As a consequence of looking around, shopping around, I worked with quite a number of anti-war groups. But also tried to get the city to adopt a resolution. I remember that was for a reparations bill. It was essentially lobbying. I was asked to go to — in fact I was very broad in my lobbying. I made a packet for every member of the council, and every member of the council got a packet and there was absolutely no response from anybody except Ron Dellums.

Then after 1970, by 1971 it was clear that if we wanted to change the policy in Viet Nam, we had to change the presidential candidate to a reasonable person, like the McGovern campaign. But all it is, I think the people who were most concerned about Viet Nam, were also energized by the feeling that by working in conjunction with other people with similar interests and goals that the process of education, reinforced by political action, reinforced by education. You had really a congregation of activities which would result in snowballing activities, which would result in a particular conclusion. We were . . . optimistic is too much of a term . . . with hindsight I would say that we were . . . extremely stimulated by each others' existence and by each others' work.

I think that the coalition effort, BCA, the April coalition, and the Community for New Politics all had a tremendous continuity of people so that the change in groups, the change in name, the change in format is the consequence of the attempt to increasingly develop a more smooth and effective political mechanism.