

While Prop. 9 may go quietly, irrepressible Rosenfield never will

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The sun was barely up, and Harvey Rosenfield already had recited the phrases “consumer rip-off” and “dirty deal” and, for rhetorical variety, “dirty, rotten deal” at least a dozen times. He was seated at the desk of a seventh-floor hotel room, one bare foot tucked under his backside, telephone pressed hard against an ear, participating long-distance in a Los Angeles radio show debate last Friday on Proposition 9.

The 46-year-old consumer activist is co-author of the initiative, which seeks to rearrange — if not effectively dismantle — legislation that this year ushered in a new era of energy deregulation for California. In the shortest telling, it proposes to double to 20% the initial customer rate reduction and also to eliminate what critics describe as a “\$28 billion, ratepayer bailout” of the utilities’ nuclear power investments. “The dirty deal,” in Ro-



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senfield shorthand.

A one-time understudy of Ralph Nader, the Santa Monica-based Rosenfield is a rare Californian in that he does not yawn widely at the mere mention of “energy deregulation.” He can talk “stranded costs” and “trust transfer amounts” for hours. The trick has been getting anyone to listen.

“Dan Quayle,” he said now, frowning. The former vice president, it seemed, had called into

the station, pre-empting Rosenfield. “He’s talking about Lewinsky and perjury, stumping for Republicans,” he explained, relaying a play-by-play account. Rosenfield sighed and told a story:

“The other day, to illustrate the Edison Company’s propaganda tactics, we brought a live bull and a pail of bull manure to its headquarters. We thought, for sure, that would bring the television cameras. I mean, we are desperate. And we did get three crews. Except that night on the news, we got bumped on two of the three stations by a story about a monkey that ate a dog in Indonesia.”

“A monkey ate a dog?”

“That’s right. Monkey eats dog. That ought to give you an idea what it’s been like.”

It was not supposed to be this way. In June, after a coalition of consumer activists qualified the initiative for the November bal-

lot, Rosenfield had talked of a “slam-dunk.” This campaign, he argued, persuasively, “had all the makings of a tremendous taxpayer-ratepayer revolt,” something in the tradition of the Jarvis-Gann property tax initiative and Proposition 103, the auto insurance revolt Rosenfield led a decade ago.

Instead, barring an unlikely prairie fire in the last month, Proposition 9 seems headed for defeat, quietly. It trails 2-to-1 in most polls, albeit with a large bloc of undecided voters. Part of the problem is that energy deregulation does not lend itself easily to sound bites. “Eliminate stranded costs” is not a battle cry to send populists running for pitchforks. Also, there seems to be a sense that — good, bad or ugly — the deal has been done; the horse has vacated the barn.

And finally, with stakes of \$28 billion, the utilities and their allies have not been shy about

reaching into their wallets. Opponents have outspent initiative sponsors at a pace of something like \$30 million to \$1 million. They have filled television and radio with commercials describing all sorts of chaos that could befall California if the measure passes, and have lined up endorsements from seemingly every corner of public life. As for Rosenfield, well, he headed out at noon Friday for The Big Fresno Fair — to pass out leaflets.

He had taken off the coat of his blue suit and put on his best disarming smile. “Excuse me,” Rosenfield would say, greeting fairgoers as they headed for the entrance. “Are you a voter?”

“No,” said one man, walking right past Rosenfield. “I’m a felon.”

“Good line,” Rosenfield called back, already angling toward his next target. Most would listen politely for a minute, accept a pamphlet and move on. A few ex-

pressed support. And one was converted on the spot.

“I thought they said put down ‘no’ on that one,” said this burly, bearded man in shorts, glowering down at the shorter Rosenfield.

“Yeah, that’s what the ads say, but” — and the campaigner was off, talking about dirty deals and rip-offs and striking a blow for lower power bills.

Five minutes later, if only to escape the intense pitch, the man finally broke and said he’d vote for the thing. Rosenfield grinned. Sometimes the monkey eats the dog.

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