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Cayetano takes on Caldwell as his primary opponent

By Richard Borreca

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In his prime, Roberto Duran was quite the fighter, winning fights in five separate decades. But for all his fame, he is remembered for saying “No mas” (no more) as he sat down and quit a title fight after being pummeled by Sugar Ray Leonard.

“No mas” comes to mind after witnessing the pummeling former Gov. Ben Cayetano gave former acting Mayor Kirk Caldwell in the debate Wednesday night in downtown Honolulu.

The two appeared along with Mayor Peter Carlisle in a 75-minute debate that was mostly about seeing if Caldwell and Carlisle could handle the Cayetano onslaught.

Cayetano’s tactics were tough enough that at the end of the debate, when the three were given a free two-minute period to ask questions of their opponents, Caldwell folded and said he didn’t have any more questions to ask.

“I’m hungry, I bet you guys are, too; I’m OK, I enjoyed the back and forth,” Caldwell said.

Neither Caldwell nor Carlisle, during any of their question periods, asked Cayetano to spell out his alternatives to the rail project or questioned why he purposely said the \$5.3 billion rail project would cost \$7 billion. But, to run out of questions in a political debate is like the matador, walking away from a still-living bull, telling him, “Well, I enjoyed that. Have a nice day.”

Cayetano, however, had plenty more questions, asking Caldwell to explain what he would do as mayor if the rail was partially built and then ran out of money. Caldwell said he already answered that question; Cayetano rephrased it; Caldwell said he would call for a public referendum, adding, “I already answered your question — if you don’t like it, I will give you the same answer.” Cayetano dismissively shot back, “I don’t know if they will like the answer, but I think they can figure you out.”

When Cayetano came out of a 10-year political retirement to run for mayor, he said it was because he wanted to stop the city’s rail plan, and also didn’t like how Honolulu was being managed. Caldwell and Carlisle are both for rail.

At the start of the campaign, Cayetano’s supporters figured Caldwell, with connections to the Democratic establishment, senior U.S. Sen. Daniel K. Inouye and local labor unions, would be the toughest opponent. They figured Carlisle, with no real base of support, was likeable but, like the political cliché goes, “His support is a mile wide and an inch deep.”

As the debate began, it was clear that Cayetano would aim for Caldwell.

Starting by listing a series of municipal deficiencies, including having the third-worst roads in the nation, Cayetano indicated these faults started when Caldwell was city managing director.

Looming over the race for mayor is the influence and political power of Inouye. Cayetano, like every other Democratic governor in Hawaii, has had to consider what to do about Inouye. Even as our longest-serving Democrat represents the state from Washington, he is not above exerting his influence in local party matters and is always the 800-pound gorilla in the back room.

So when Inouye recently gave a news conference with both Caldwell and Carlisle and the rail developers, he became a presence that Cayetano could no longer avoid.

“Sen. Inouye has been listening to the government. He is at the 30,000-foot level dealing at the national and international level.

“He is out of touch, as far as I am concerned. I respect Sen. Inouye, but we should not defer to him,” Cayetano said Wednesday night.

On Thursday, Inouye shot back: “I was deeply offended by the statements and negative tactics attributed to Gov. Cayetano. The race for Honolulu mayor should be about the issues facing our city, and in these serious times, there is no need for personal attacks.”

So finally, we are getting it all out in the open. Cayetano’s challenge gives Honolulu the debate it needs.

Do we need rail? Are we big enough for rail? What more development do we really want? And what are we willing to give up for more development?

There is no question about Inouye’s political clout, and the election will be decided on the issue of rail, not a referendum on Inouye.

This week’s debate showed that before they get in the ring again with Cayetano, both Carlisle and Caldwell must figure out a way to explain why they are in the race and why their election is vital, because Cayetano certainly knows what he is doing.

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