Questions on Ex-Housekeeper Emerge for a Candidate

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LOS ANGELES — In many ways, it had the makings of the kind of classic late-campaign political dust-up that happens so regularly in high-profile California campaigns: the celebrity lawyer, the illegal immigrant, a welter of conflicting allegations and conspiracy charges, a candidate willing to take a lie-detector test and the scene of reporters clustered in a swanky lawyer’s office overlooking the Hollywood Hills. News conferences were streamed live on TMZ.com, the scandal-chasing Hollywood Web site that has become a force in politics and celebrity in this town.

In this case, though, it is a potentially problematic episode for Meg Whitman, the Republican who has broken spending records trying to become governor, and still has found herself tied in polls with her Democratic opponent, Jerry Brown, the state attorney general.

In a year in which immigration has become a hot and complicated issue, particularly in this state, Ms. Whitman found herself trying to explain how she had employed an illegal immigrant as a housekeeper for nine years, something she said she learned only when the housekeeper confessed last year and was fired.
The development — which Ms. Whitman described as a smear by her opponents — came in the midst of a campaign in which she has struggled to be sufficiently tough on illegal immigration to appeal to conservative Republicans without alienating independents and Hispanics who are critical to any winning electoral calculation here. A poll in The Los Angeles Times last week found that she was struggling against Mr. Brown for support among Latino voters.

Ms. Whitman, responding to a question at a news conference Thursday in Santa Monica, said she was prepared to take a lie-detector test to prove that she did not know that her Mexican housekeeper, Nicandra Díaz Santillán, was an illegal immigrant until Ms. Díaz Santillán told her in June 2009, six months after her campaign began.

“I can not tell you how stunned we were when Nicky told us she was illegal,” she said. Ms. Whitman said she knew nothing of a letter sent to her home by the Social Security Administration saying that the Social Security number on file did not match with the name of her housekeeper. But just a few hours after Ms. Whitman spoke, Ms. Diaz Santillán appeared at her own news conference with a celebrity lawyer, Gloria Allred, to produce the April 22, 2003, letter, with what she asserted was handwriting on it from Ms. Whitman’s husband, Dr. Griffith Harsh. The document was partly filled out, with a note scribbled at the bottom: “Nicky. Please check this. Thanks.”

Ms. Allred asserted that this was proof that the couple had at least an indication that they were employing an illegal immigrant. A few hours later, the Whitman camp said Dr. Harsh had perhaps received such a letter but, understandably, had forgotten it after all these years.

Ms. Whitman’s advisers disputed the way Ms. Allred characterized the letter, saying it was easy to read as nothing more than a routine request from the Social Security Administration to resolve a discrepancy.

Rebecca Cathcart contributed reporting.
Editorial: If He Can’t Take the Heat

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