

Thank You, South Carolina

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Thrills and Spills in the South

The television comedian Jon Stewart has a recurring segment entitled “Thank you, South Carolina” on his popular “Daily Show”. Recent attractions have included the antics of Governor Mark Sanford, who went missing for several days last summer ostensibly hiking in the Appalachians but actually visiting his secret girlfriend in Argentina; and those of a South Carolina man arrested after being caught on surveillance tape having sex with a mare named Sugar.

Hollywood types laughing at southern hicks is hardly new, and usually unfair: in South Carolina military technology thrives around Charleston, one of America’s ten job-creating cities. But even the most passionate South Carolinian has to admit that Mr. Stewart will have plenty of fodder to choose from for his segment as the mid-terms approach. One prominent option would be Nikki Haley, 38, a conservative Republican state legislator and the daughter of Indian immigrants, who swept from last place to first in the primary after an endorsement from Sarah Palin, and then handily won the run-off. Ms. Haley’s campaign has been rocked by two unproven allegations of marital infidelity, for which no evidence has been presented and which she denies. Despite the racy smears, she remains on track to become both South Carolina’s first minority and first female governor -- the latter perhaps a particular hurdle in a state that doesn’t have a single female state senator and ranks last among the 50 states in the number of women lawmakers overall.

But the pundits are not writing off her Democratic opponent Vincent Sheheen, a 39-year-old state senator from a well-known political family. He is expected to link Ms Haley to her political mentor - the tarnished Mr Sanford. Ms Haley will also have to convince voters in bible country that she is really a Christian. Born Nimrata Nikki Randhawa and raised in the Sikh religion, she was baptised in the Methodist Church when she married. But the grave charge that she doesn’t actually “accept Jesus Christ as her Lord and saviour” dogged her throughout the primary campaign and will doubtless be renewed.

Then there is the strange skirmish for the Senate, in which Jim DeMint, an arch-conservative and a favourite of the tea-party movement is pitted against Democrat Alvin Greene, an unemployed military veteran who is facing a felony charge for obscenity. Mr. Greene was unknown even in his hometown until he managed, without campaigning and with virtually no money, to defeat a well-funded former state legislator. Some believe Mr Greene, who is black, won his primary because his name was listed before his opponent’s name on the ballot, or perhaps because voters confused him with the gospel singer Al Green. But Mr Greene’s chances of getting any further are non-existent.

Next candidate for the show comes the remarkable case of Tim Scott, a 44-year-old state legislator who looks likely to become the only black Republican in Congress. On June 22nd Mr. Scott pulled off a stunning victory in the runoff for the Republican nomination against Paul Thurmond, the youngest child of the late Strom Thurmond, still the most popular politician in South Carolina’s history.

Finally, there is the duel in the second congressional district between a five-term Republican congressman, Joe Wilson, and his Democratic adversary Rob Miller, a former Marine and Iraq veteran who gave Mr Wilson the closest race of his career two years ago. Mr Wilson, who shot to fame in September when he shouted “You lie!” at Barack Obama during a joint session of Congress, has amassed nearly \$4 m for the contest, while Mr Miller has raised \$2.3 m. Each raked in some \$1 m from their supporters within 48 hours of the outburst. According to the non-partisan Centre for Responsive Politics, the combined \$6 million-plus already collected makes their bout, for now, anyway, the most expensive congressional race of 2010. Pretty good going for two little words.