



Gov. Brown and the California Train Wreck

Jerry Brown certainly has experience in government: He has been California's Attorney General, its 34th Governor for two terms, Mayor of Oakland, and now California's 39th Governor. His father was also Governor and his sister was State Treasurer as well as a candidate for Governor. The Browns' political dynasty in California is similar to that of the Kennedys on the other coast.



But does belonging to a family heavily invested in "public service" give one special talents for wise governance, for solving public policy train wrecks? Governor Brown certainly inherited a mess. The states finances have been in shambles for decades, reflected in the gross overspending and unaccountability at the local level as well.

Seventeen years ago, [Orange County](#), one of the most attractive, affluent spots in all the land, went bankrupt. In 1994 the Republicans were in control of county and state government, not Browns Democrats. The allure of mortgaging the future to buy political popularity, however, has never changed. Gray Davis was recalled because he ignored the states Constitution, including its budgetary requirements. Interestingly, Davis himself got his first big-time political breakthrough when, as [California Controller](#) in 1989, he charged Republican Governor George Deukmejian with trying to mask the states budget deficits.

It should surprise none that since Gray Davis was recalled and replaced by the Governor, the Golden State has continued to suffer a financial meltdown. When Brown took office as the state's 39th Governor, he faced a \$26.6 billion budget shortfall. So far he and the Democratic state lawmakers have made no real progress toward lowering that figure. Brown has already missed a deadline for putting on the ballot a measure to extend tax rates in a special election, and concedes that the measure will not be on the June ballot, when many cities will have elections.

Senate President Pro Tempore Darrell Steinberg, a Democrat, has declared that any budget solution must be bipartisan, adding:

Time is of the essence....We're talking days, not weeks. There's going to be an all-hands effort to try to pull together an agreement and to try to get the minimum number of Republican votes or more than the minimum number to give the people a choice.

Governor Brown also labeled Republican state legislators as obstructionists for opposing his plans to eliminate state redevelopment agencies so more money could be funneled to education and public safety:

Well if you're not going to vote to extend taxes, you're not going to vote to cut, you're not going to



Written by [Bruce Walker](#) on March 22, 2011

vote to do anything to redevelopment so what the hell are you going to do? By the way, if you're not going to do anything, why do you take a paycheck? I don't see this as a Republican or a Democratic issue. This is a matter of all of us thinking as Californians first and acting in solidarity to grapple with problems that have been avoided too long.

Browns scheme is to ask voters to extend temporary increases in the personal income, sales, and vehicle taxes which were enacted two years ago, which he believes would bring in an estimated \$9.2 billion a year for five more years, and to combine that with \$12.5 billion in spending cuts. The Governor and state Democratic lawmakers act as though Republicans have no proposals of their own. In fact, while Republicans do not support Browns plan, several of them have a counter-proposal which would involve government pension reform and a spending cap on state government. The plan would also include regulatory changes especially those related to environmental control, such as the strict limitations on irrigation in the San Joaquin Valley which have caused dramatic losses in some of the richest agricultural land in the world.

Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger last year obtained concessions from public employee unions on state pensions and those were passed through the Legislature. Brown has won some additional concessions from state public employee unions. Republicans want more changes, especially in public employee pension systems; however, according to Republican State Senator Sam Blakeslee of San Luis Obispo, Brown has rejected their ideas. Blakeslee has suggested that the problem is that the Governor and Democratic state legislators are major donors to Democrat campaigns. He continued,

All five of us [Republican legislators] who have stepped forward have put ourselves in very, very precarious positions. We would not have sat down at the table if we thought this was a sham offer to negotiate. If at the end of the day [Governor Brown's] unwilling to accept any of these proposals, I think it's going to make it more difficult for him to engage us and others in the future.

Blakeslee also noted that those Republicans who sat down with Brown were labeled [traitors](#) within their own party, and implied that Brown seemed to be simply toying with them for his own temporary political gain. At the Republican State Convention last weekend in Sacramento, the majority of Republicans condemned the few of their party who had been working with the Governor, citing Brown's desire for a "fig leaf" of bipartisan support.

Democrat Senator Mark Leno of San Francisco, Chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, declared that it was too late to put the tax extensions before voters on a June 7 ballot, and warned that time is slipping away: "Every day that passes is a day we can't retrieve, which makes me concerned about getting to a June 14 ballot date." The legislature is also constitutionally required to pass a state budget by mid-June. Most Republicans say that Democrats, who have controlled the State Legislature and most statewide elective offices for many decades, need to live with the state budget something that former Republican State Senator George Runner, now on the California Board of Equalization, sees as possible. He points out that the amount of revenue flowing into the state coffers is about \$85 billion. The states population is about 36 million. Runner contends that the state budget deficit is the responsibility of Democrats, the majority party in the Assembly and Senate. Those Democrats can make the tough, unpopular, cuts to balance that budget, he insists, adding, "Let's not give them any help."

What ought to be done? The proper decisions are not complicated; they simply require political backbone and the courage to be unpopular with some political activists. How about these reforms: (1) cut state salaries across the board by 10 percent; (2) repeal all state environmental laws which restrict agriculture or energy production; and (3) eliminate all business taxes. Would California a state with a



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long history of bipartisan pandering to voters on a range of issues have the political moxie to make these hard choices? So far, there is little evidence of the guts needed to make the Golden State flourish again.



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