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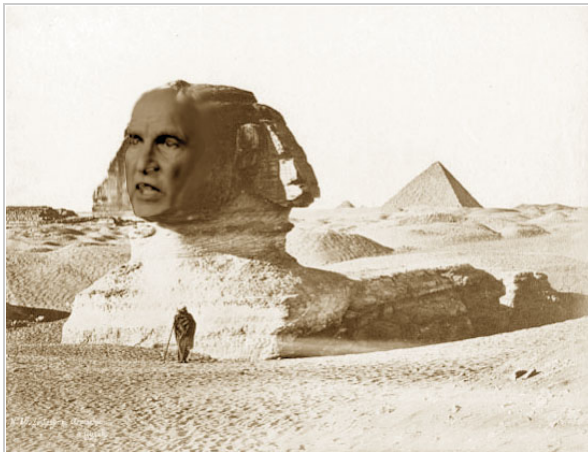


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The Riddle of Jerry Brown

Tim Cavanaugh | September 8, 2011

Katherine Mangu-Ward **noted** a few hours ago that California Gov. Jerry Brown has captured the imaginations of libertarians, thanks to his ski-helmet veto and the accompanying epigram "Not every human problem deserves a law." In a **HuffPost** article that namechecks me, Cato Institute executive veep David Boaz makes the case that Brown's budget veto, along with the helmet decision and the recent choice "not to go down [the] slippery slope where the state decides what citizens must wear when petitioning their government," are all causes for hope:



Brown's libertarian streak isn't entirely surprising. When he became governor the first time, in 1975, he talked about "an era of limits" and increased state spending **less than his predecessor**, Ronald Reagan. He opposed Proposition 13 but then embraced it after the voters did and rode its implementation to easy reelection. Running for president, he supported a balanced budget amendment. He liberalized the state's marijuana law, decriminalized homosexuality, and vigorously opposed the antigay Briggs Initiative. He **declared** on "Meet the Press" that his goal was "To stand up to the special pleaders who are encamped, I should say, encircling the state capitol, and to see through their particular factional claims to the broad public interest."

I had high hopes that the 73-year-old newly elected governor, with no more dreams of higher office, would aggressively confront California's out-of-control spending and special-interest deals. Brown watcher Tim Cavanaugh of Reason **says** that any hope that Brown would actually take on the spending interests, many of them public employee unions that helped him win office again, ended with his sweetheart contract for the prison guards union. But I'm still hopeful. Governor Brown knows his state is in debt up to its eyeballs, he knows where the money goes, and he knows that the special pleaders are still encircling the state capitol. And he's still skeptical about the "inexorable transfer of authority . . . to the state" and the idea that "every human problem deserves a law." That's a good basis for a new era of limits on power.

1. "Brown watcher" sounds like a fetish niche market.
2. I believe hope ended millions of years ago. The only thing that Jerry Brown ended with his generous

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new contract for the California Correctional Peace Officers Association was the honeymoon/suspension-of-disbelief/incoming-momentum value he had in the first few months of his administration.

3. Beware of assuming "transfer of authority . . . to the state" has the same meaning to Jerry Brown that it has to the rest of us. The universal theory of Prop 13 holds that the 1978 ballot initiative limiting the growth of property tax rates (which are usually decided at the county level in these here United States) ended up destroying the state by limiting local control and causing a "centralization of funding of services" in Sacramento, as a Hit & Run commenter described it five years ago. It's advisable to hear "repeal Prop 13" when California Democrats say, "return control to the local level."

4. The title "Gov. Veto," like the title "Pop Diva," risks being diluted through overuse. In 2008 Arnold Schwarzenegger was crowned "Bill Terminator" for vetoing a record 412 bills – except that it wasn't really a record, just a "modern" record, and he didn't even set it but merely placed second behind George Deukmejian. And he signed 772 bills at the same time.

Nevertheless I believe in the hope that we'll win the race to the future of hope. If the Clinton Administration taught us anything, it's that we should appreciate the good things that happen on an executive's watch, even if the executive's only contribution was failing to prevent the good thing from happening. In that spirit, I note that since Jerry Brown came into office, the state government's credit rating has improved, the budget has gotten slightly smaller, and the state sales and use tax dropped by 1 percent [pdf] on July 1.

This last item has not been widely noted (mostly because it was overshadowed by the Amazon tax fight, though I should have made a bigger deal of it at the time), but for a glimpse at the Golden State's tax madness in practice, dig the sales tax rates by city. Notable strange phenomena: Palmdale and Lancaster have higher rates (8.75 percent) than San Francisco (8.5 percent); L.A. County non-paradises Pico Rivera and South Gate seem to have the highest total sales tax rates (9.75 percent) in the state; in a refutation of the principle that high sales taxes are a mechanism to fleece out-of-towners, tourist-free Monterey Park has a higher tax rate (8.75) than tourist-dependent Monterey (7.25 percent); and Steve Jobs isn't paying his fair share: Cupertino (8.25 percent) has a less punishing rate than Los Angeles (8.75 percent). None of these rates are low, but they were higher in June, and this is clearly a step in the right direction.

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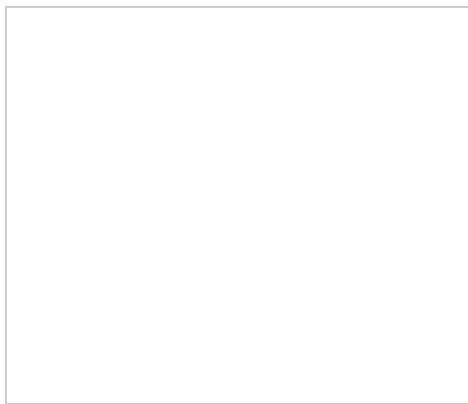
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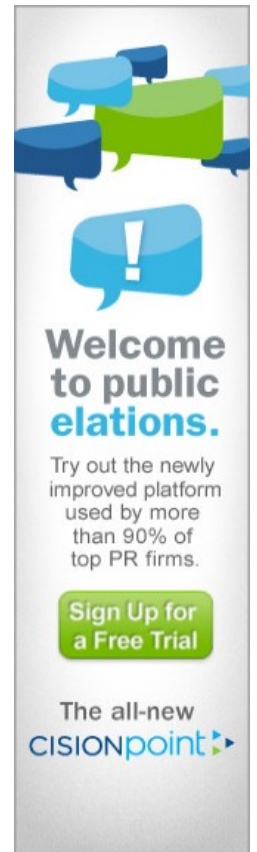
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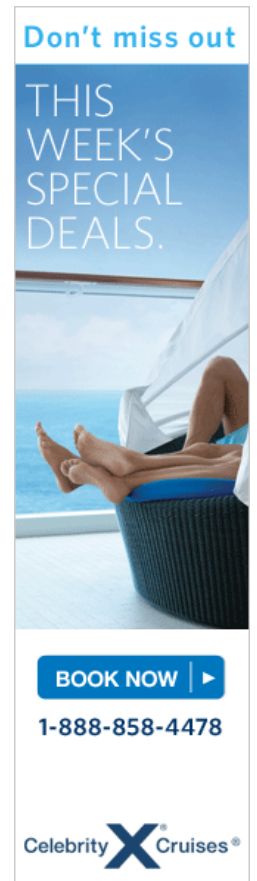
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