

OPINION

The First Law of Political Motion

California still looking for a bold push forward

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Many people see politics as an unfathomable mess, a sort of alchemy in the 21st century. But a comparison of physical laws to politics will yield surprising results. It turns out that politics follows the same rules we learned about in high school physics.

Take Newton's First Law of Motion, which says an object at rest will stay at rest unless acted on by an outside force. Politically, it can be read as "government keeps doing the same thing unless forced to change by an outside force."

The Legislature has been "at rest" for over a decade, with only occasional bursts of movement -- and most of those have been cautious half-measures. Most of the energy in the Capitol is focused inward -- a whirlpool of self-promotion, special interests and positioning for the next rung up the political ladder.

A body at rest isn't necessarily inert, particularly when talking about government; instead it's a state of frenetic paralysis that is focused inward, rather than moving the state in any particular direction.

Politics in a democracy is important -- it has always been "rough and tumble," and has always been part of policy-making. But in the Legislature, politics isn't a part of government policy-making. It has replaced it.

Instead of making needed and often-talked-about reforms, the Legislature spends millions and exhausts its energy on media spin, photo-ops, and dollar-generating legislation -- always spinning for next election. Numbers tell the story: state spending has increased from \$903 per capita in 1983 to more than \$2,250 today, with little to show for it.

Some pundits say California is too big and diverse to govern. But solutions are not hindered by our "bigness" or our diversity -- if anything, "big diversity" has kept California going while government grew less responsive.

Stalling on schools, stalling on pensions: Spending on education has increased almost 40 percent since 1995. But 30 percent of students never graduate, and dropout rates in our poorest schools are reaching 50 percent; college officials report that record numbers of first-year students need remedial math and English; and instead of insisting that high-school graduates actually have a high-school education, the Legislature finds ways to delay implementing exit exams.

California's cumbersome education establishment is a body at rest, and casting blame or a few dollars for another special program won't change that. Without real reform, and that means big changes, California's education system, including how we pay for teachers and schools, will become even more immobile and ineffective.

Without fiscal reform, city after city -- along with the state and many counties -- will face the same crisis that cost San Diego's mayor his job: a pension juggernaut that will consume budgets and eliminate vital services.

Without question, the men and women who wear a badge, a gun or fire helmet (and their families) deserve bigger, better pensions and benefits. Simply put, we need them, and they can -- and do -- die doing their jobs. But these vital public-safety services are going to be cut back unless we find a way to control pension costs for other public employees.

Step outside and push: California needs bolder reforms and stronger leaders. Our history is rich with examples: John Fremont carved a path to open California for settlement and later became the first Republican nominee for president, running on an abolitionist platform and galvanizing a national movement; Hiram Johnson took on corrupt politicians and railroad barons, giving the power of government back to voters; and Pat Brown shepherded an era of investment in California's future and helped create what was then called the greatest education system in the world.

These leaders stepped outside the comfortable status quo to become a force for change. They risked much, and sometimes they failed. But they left a legacy of meaningful reform.

Change, however, never lasts forever. And rarely is it painless.

California needs big, new changes today -- an outside force to get it moving again. Gov. Schwarzenegger might be that outside force, if he can avoid being sucked into the whirlpool of politically safe insiders or meaningless name-calling and posturing.

His current proposals are a start, but to turn California around he must go further. His slide in the polls is temporary, the result of a barrage of negative ads and a public perception that he is retreating. Rather than backing off proposals, he needs to foster a larger public debate, talk directly to the public and push for even more meaningful reforms.

Such reforms will not come easy, but if Gov. Schwarzenegger succeeds, he'll carve out his place in history as a true force of change, and get California moving.

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