

Raise My Taxes, Please, Then Spend Them Wisely

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It's clear now that our state, county and city are really broke. Down and out. Don't know where the next meal is coming from. Nothing ahead but cuts and more cuts. How'd that happen?

Californians are better endowed by nature than most anybody on the planet. We're major players in the world economy. Some, it seems, still have money to burn. Most have always worked hard to get it together. We've raised "above average" children, avid to learn. Matured into a rainbow society: nothing obsolete about us. We're fun-lovers, innovators, risk-takers, even utopians.

But today, despite the growing need among us for every single essential public service, everything that civilizes, everything that once made us feel safe and proud and happy to be Californians, we're reluctant to pay out good money for any of that.

So government is broke. We're going to have to short-change the sick, the poor and the elderly, starve the schools, leave the potholes, close the parks, maybe cut back on police & firefighters.

We can blame this catastrophe, not so much on the current economic crisis, as on Howard Jarvis, Paul Gann, our Legislature and Governor Jerry Brown. In 1977 housing prices soared and re-assessments frightened homeowners with the prospect of rapidly escalating property taxes. While the politicians dithered, Jarvis and Gann rammed through their ill-conceived Proposition 13 and got it approved by two thirds of the (mostly property-owning) voters. Results: an immediate huge and lasting decline in public revenues, and a crippling two-thirds requirement for passing budgets or raising taxes.

Now I'm a "beneficiary" of Prop 13. Bought my house just six months before it passed. But I voted against it then, and wish you had too. My two sons, hard-put to pay mortgages on Bay Area houses of comparable value to mine, pay ten times the property taxes I pay. So do many of my neighbors. The public schools my grandkids attend are scandalously neglected. But the Bank of America, Exxon, Gallo Wines and other fat-cat corporations are paying property taxes based on 1975 assessments that increase only two per cent each year.

The Jarvis/Gann earthquake was a sign of something even more dangerous to our state: a "conservative" movement that conserves nothing and seeks to "shrink the government down to a size where we can drown it in the bathtub." That movement, epitomized by Ronald Reagan, has plagued us for forty years. It hasn't "shrunk government" at all. What it has done is give good government a bad name, replace progressive taxation with regressive, institutionalize inequality, leave vastly increased debt to our grandchildren, and divert revenues from vital services towards war, incarceration and corporate welfare.

Californians from the Gold Rush on have neglected community to get rich quick. We've more often wrestled with Nature than befriended her, so we can no longer count on her bounty. We've more often despised the stranger than welcomed him, so we can't now trust him to do things our way. Like Jarvis and Gann, we've indulged the peculiar inclination to sabotage government rather than helping it do the best job it can. So in today's extremity we can't count on that government to do what we need it to do.

There's a solution to this. It's called engaged, responsible citizenship. Good government is participatory, genuinely democratic, open, accountable, free from corruption. It's also well-funded on a reliable basis through taxes (a lot of taxes), so it can perform the wide range of services that make the good life possible for the governed.

To have such a government, we must quit seeing government as the enemy. Elect good representatives and expect the best from them. Make clear, persistent demands for the

services we require, volunteer somewhere, and be downright cheerful about paying a big chunk of our incomes in fairly levied taxes.

For starters, we surely know enough by now to demand drastic changes in Prop 13. Time to buckle down and do that. The future looks pretty sketchy right now. It's up to us to make it good for every Californian.