

California Renaissance

Change is being heralded up and down the Golden State by such organizations as Repair California, Saving California Communities, California Forward, Bay Area Council, etc. The informed citizen would note that we have been down this road before with property tax reform, education reform, prison reform, redistricting reform, etc. Why take this call seriously now?

We should not heed the call and join the movement just because the polls say that a large majority of Californians are dissatisfied with the status quo. Polls reflect people's momentarily feelings and their results are as fleeting as those feelings. The government of this state is still in the midst of a crisis and it would not be wise for us to react to the events and emotions of the day. We should rather take time out to gain the proper perspective before taking action.

Once we have reached the conclusion that the status quo is not acceptable then we must ensure that this next round of changes is transformational if they are to last through generations. They must reach deep into the core of the government machinery and deep into the people's psyche. We need to reexamine the foundations of our government as we concurrently adjust our individual behavior to support the changes. This is surely a monumental task but not impossible.

Should Californians decide to take on the task of truly rebuilding the Golden State, I propose that this effort be guided by the following principles that embody the core human values upon which this nation was founded.

First, it is essential to recognize that the reason for government to exist is to create and uphold the public good where there is none. Where the people are willing and able to properly care for their own affairs to the detriment of none, the government should stay out of these affairs.

Second, once a democratic government is in place, the people should let it govern. People's wishes are expressed to our representatives in the legislature and are fulfilled by the administration, within the boundaries set by the judiciary. With these three branches of government doing their job, people should not interfere with public policies and their execution (through ballot initiatives and referenda or otherwise) unless there are serious threats to the public good or the democracy. Public policies should be given adequate time to bear fruit. Conversely, only matters of great importance to the public good should be submitted directly to the people for a decision.

Third, legislators should legislate without regulating. Legislators convert people's wishes into laws and it is up to the executive branch to create regulations to implement the laws. No law should regulate the minutiae of government operations or the detail of people's daily life. Uncontrolled lawmaking casts a rigid grid that produces the maze of government bureaucracy that we have and fragments people's lives.

Fourth, all levels of government should work seamlessly to serve the citizens. In reforming the government we should be cautious to not put the emphasis on defining the government structure; we should focus instead on service to the customer. The government should find out what the citizens need and organize itself around the

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fulfillment of those needs. The emerging concept of “one-stop kiosk” to deliver certain popular bundles of services to the citizenry is an example of this shift of focus.

Fifth, the government should extend its vision beyond the one-year horizon and plan for the long-term welfare of the state. It should create stable sources of revenues, five-year financial plans, ten-year economic plans and twenty-year infrastructure plans in accordance with the vision.

Sixth, we need to strengthen accountability, a cornerstone of democracy. Are tax dollars producing the intended results? The government would not be able to tell unless it budgets by intended outcome, tracks the resources used and measures the results achieved. This is known as performance budgeting. Furthermore, if we are to hold government officials accountable, we should apply the system of reward and punishment that exists in the private sector to the government sector.

The principled approach described above is effective only if it is supported by a concurrent change in behavior of the state denizens. As citizens of a new California, we should realize that the fate of this state, our own fate, is in our hands. It behooves us to switch role from victim of the system to co-creator of the system and actively engage in public policy making. In the same spirit, we should take responsibility for the various aspects of our personal life - health, education and employment - and help the government take care of the aspects that are beyond our control such as national defense and environmental protection.

The principles discussed above may appear simplistic and academic to some readers but I believe that if we are to create lasting changes that would benefit future generations we need to return first to the simple and basic premises upon which this nation was built. If we proceed without first re-anchoring our approach in these core human values, we run the risk of applying sub-optimal fixes that would only mask the real problems and perpetuate the cycle of superficial changes.

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