Jerry Brown 2.0: Bicycle Crank?

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By Rick Bernardi

There was a time when California had the nation's hippest, most innovative, progressive young Governor. I grew up in that California, and Jerry Brown was about as different a politician as you could find in a Governor's mansion, or anywhere else. In fact, Jerry Brown didn't even live in the Governor's mansion. Thinking the mansion too ostentatious, Brown preferred sleeping on the floor of a modest Sacramento apartment. And instead of being chauffeured in the Governor's limousine, Brown drove a Plymouth Satellite to work.

A former Jesuit seminarian, Brown, after leaving office, traveled to Japan to study Zen Buddhism. Elected to the Governorship at the age of 36, Brown, still a bachelor, became even more famous as the only Governor in the nation who was dating a rock star. A young, idealistic California progressive, Brown championed the environment, appointed more women and minorities to office than any Governor before him, appointed the first openly gay Judges in the nation, and was a committed opponent of capital punishment.

All while Governing as a fiscal conservative, slashing state spending and building a $5 billion surplus (equivalent to $17 billion today).

Brown, who had proposed building a state space academy, and launching a satellite into orbit to provide the state with communications capability in an emergency, was nicknamed "Moonbeam" by his then girlfriend Linda Ronstadt. That was subsequently picked up and repeated by Chicago Sun-Times columnist Mike Royko, who dubbed Brown "Governor Moonbeam," and Brown, who had actually been promoting the state's economic development of its aerospace industry, became ridiculed as a flaky hippie for his efforts.

Brown began his first Presidential bid in 1976, two years after becoming California's Governor, and challenged President Carter for the Democratic Party nomination in 1980. After leaving office, Brown made an unsuccessful bid for the Senate in 1982, and another unsuccessful bid for the Presidency in 1992. In 1999, Brown assumed public office again, as Mayor of Oakland, California, followed by his return to statewide office as Attorney General in 2007. And then, in 2010, Brown ran for Governor again. His opponent, Hewlett-Packard CEO Meg Whitman, ran on a platform calling for, among other things, suspension of outgoing Governor Schwarzenegger's landmark climate change law. For California's environmentally-concerned majority, the choice was clear. In a year of Republican landslides, Jerry Brown won with 53.8% of the vote.

And yet, it's become apparent since his return that Brown 2.0 is not the old, familiar Brown 1.0. Where the hip, young Governor with the rock star girlfriend was known for his innovative ideas and strong record of environmental protection, in the era of climate change, Jerry Brown has become the gubernatorial equivalent of the cranky old man yelling at the neighborhood kids to get off his lawn, repeatedly opposing the most modest of proposals to protect the state's burgeoning population of bicyclists.

What the hell happened?

Jerry Brown was never the type of politician that could be boxed into an easy stereotype, but is there anything less innovative, less environmental--less hip—than championing the supremacy of the automobile? Seriously, who, aside from the most reactionary of troglodytes, thinks that we haven't done enough to protect aggressive and unsafe drivers?

And yet that cranky old troglodyte is who Jerry Brown 2.0 seems to have become. "Hey you crazy kids, get your bikes off my road!"

We've heard it all before Governor. Every time some driver with delusions of vigilante grandeur pulls up just behind our wheel and lays on the horn. Every time some coward hiding behind his fortress of steel shaves a pass so close we see our lives flash before our eyes. Every time some motorized bully uses his multi-ton weapon to force us off the road.

"Get off my road!"

In fairness, Jerry Brown *says* "bicycle safety [is] a goal I wholeheartedly support." He first said it when he vetoed California's 3-foot safe passing bill in 2011, citing his objection to an entirely imaginary provision that he claimed would require drivers to slow to 15 MPH to pass cyclists (the bill actually established a minimum 3 foot passing distance, but allowed drivers who were traveling at less than 15 MPH to pass closer than 3 feet). But remember, Brown *says* he supports bicycle safety, so he made a personal, face-to-face promise—not once, but twice—to Senator Alan Lowenthal that he would sign the bill if the offending imaginary provision was removed.

So Senator Lowethal removed the 15 MPH language that Brown was misinterpreting. The new bill was passed one year later, and sent to the Governor's office for his signature.

And damned if he didn't veto it again.

The problem this time? He raised a new objection— one that he had never conveyed to the bill's author—and that was, shall we say, not "reality-based." And of course, as is now becoming traditional with the Governor, Brown remarked, while sticking it to cyclists once again, that "I applaud the author's contiuig work to improve bicycle safety." Well, you can't say he hasn't learned how to smile as he sticks the knife in.

Or how to hide bad press. In the time-honored political tradition of burying unpopular governance, Brown vetoed the 3-foot passing bill on a Friday, calculating that the media would miss the news. And he was right—the media did largely miss the story. But California cyclists did not miss the story.

But less noticed that weekend was another Brown veto with enormous safety implications for cyclists—a bill that would have raised the base fine for drivers convicted of using a hand-held cell phone to talk or to text while driving. His reasoning? "I believe the current fines…for cellphone use and texting while driving are a powerful deterrent," the Governor stated in his veto message. "I have found even a $50 ticket unpleasant enough."

The current law establishes a base fine of $20 for a first offense, and $50 for subsequent offenses, (additional state and county fees are added on to the fine, so the actual out-of-pocket cost to a driver is in the $200-$300 range).

So those must have been some fines Senator Joe Simitian, the bill's author, was proposing, to garner the Governor's veto. How much more?

An additional $10.

Ten dollars.

A fine for a first offense would have been raised from $20 to $30, and fines for subsequent offenses would have been raised from $50 to $60. *

Oh, and after the first offense, drivers would have received a point on their driving records.

And that additional $10? That would have gone towards creating and funding a new distracted driving program at the state Office of Traffic Safety. But hey, why discourage distracted driving? It's not as if distracted driving is equivalent to driving impaired—right, Governor?

Well, to be fair, the last weekend in September wasn't a total wash. The Governor did sign one bicycle bill—AB 2245, which exempted bicycle infrastructure from environmental review. So he got that one right.

But he got so much wrong. Supporting bike lanes in the 21st century is like supporting apple pie. It's great that he's supporting apple pie, but it's not so great that the once-cutting edge young Governor is now crankily yelling at the kids to get off his lawn. Or roads.

** Note: Senator Simitian's cell phone bill would also have extended the driver's prohibition on cell phones to cyclists, with a $20 fie for a first offense, a $50 fine for subsequent offenses, but no points applied against the cyclist's driving record.*