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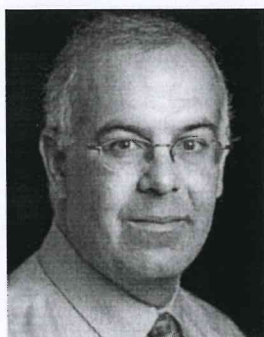
OP-ED COLUMNIST

## Tom Joad Gave Up

By DAVID BROOKS

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Atherton, Calif.



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Sometimes it's hard to remember what good government looks like: government that disciplines itself but looks to the long term; government that inspires trust; government that promotes social mobility without busting the budget.

That kind of government existed for decades right here in California. Between 1911 and the '60s, California had a series of governors — like Hiram Johnson, Earl Warren, Goodwin Knight and Pat Brown — who were pro-market and pro-business, but also progressive reformers.

They rode a great wave of prosperity, and people flocked to the Golden State, but they used the fruits of that prosperity in a disciplined way to lay the groundwork for even more growth. They built an outstanding school and university system. They started a series of gigantic public works projects that today are seen as engineering miracles. These included monumental water projects, harbors and ports, the sprawling highway system and even mental health facilities.

They disdained partisanship. They continually reorganized government to make it more businesslike and cost effective. "Thus," the historian Kevin Starr has written, "California progressivism contained within itself both liberal and conservative impulses, as judged by the standards of today."

Most important, California progressives focused on the middle class. By the end of these years, California enjoyed the highest living standards in the country. The core of the state's strength was in the suburbs. Between 1945 and 1950 alone, the San Fernando Valley doubled in population. In one 12-month period, between 1959 and 1960, Valley residents applied for 6,000 swimming pool permits.

In fits and starts, California's progressive model has been abandoned. The state's current economic decline and political stagnation is a result of that abandonment. Now California government has all the dysfunctions that mark national government, but at a more advanced stage.

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Both parties helped kill off California's pro-market progressivism. Some assaults came from the left. First, there was the growing power of the public sector employee unions. These unions began lobbying for richer salaries and pensions. That, of course, is their job. But in the 1970s, governors started caving in. Money that could have gone into development went into prison guard benefits. Infrastructure spending, for example, has dropped from 20 percent of the state budget to 3 percent.

Then there was the growing power of the environmental movement. In the 1960s, environmental groups protested against the excesses of the infrastructure boom. Many of their complaints were absolutely legitimate. But over the years, environmental concern transmogrified into a "small is beautiful" ideology. A new cadre of activists arose — hostile to suburbia, skeptical of capitalism and eager to impose greater regulations and costs on small businesses.

As Joel Kotkin of Chapman University has pointed out, the interests of the affluent class along the coasts began to crowd out the interests of the middle-class suburbanites and agricultural workers further inland. "The result," he writes, "is two separate California realities: a lucrative one for the wealthy and for government workers, who are largely insulated from economic decline; and a grim one for the private-sector middle and working classes, who are fleeing the state."

Another assault on California progressivism came from the right. Conservatives refused to acknowledge the public sector's role in creating the state's prosperity. With Proposition 13 and other measures that cut taxes, they cut off revenue and pushed through structural reforms, making it hard for future administrations to raise funds. Many on the right became unwilling to think creatively about using government to promote prosperity.

The result is a state in crisis. Eighty-two percent of Californians say they believe their state is heading in the wrong direction, according to this week's University of Southern California/Los Angeles Times survey. State growth has lagged behind national growth. Unemployment is at 12.4 percent statewide and at catastrophic levels in the Central Valley. More people are leaving California for Oklahoma and Texas than came here during the Dust Bowl days of the 1930s. Tom Joad is giving up.

Meanwhile, the political set is an embarrassment. As jobs disappear, legislators are fixated on transgender rights and deals for lobbyists. Legislators are polarized and gridlocked. The pension system is \$300 billion in the red, and the state hops from one fiscal crisis to the next.

The answer is to return to the tradition of pro-market progressivism that built modern California in the first place. Except this time, it can't be about building up the '50s-style suburbs. It needs to focus on supporting the immigrant entrepreneurs, averting state bankruptcy and unleashing the industrial and agricultural base.

The antigovernment conservatives and the unions have built institutions and bases of support. The heirs to the pro-market progressive tradition have not. What's needed is not a revolution, but a restoration and a modernization of what California once had.

A version of this op-ed appeared in print on September 28, 2010, on page A29 of the New York edition.

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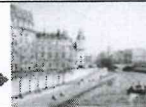
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