

EDITORIAL: Brown challenges car culture in inaugural speech



California Governor Jerry Brown

REBECCA BLACKWELL — AP

In an inaugural speech Monday seemingly aimed at a national audience, Gov. Jerry Brown set forth a lofty goal: Reduce California's petroleum use by 50% in 15 years.

He left unanswered how to achieve the ambitious goal in a state where the car culture dominates.

Vagaries notwithstanding, the juxtaposition was striking. Brown called for a reduction in gasoline use as incoming U.S. Senate Leader Mitch McConnell prepares to put the Keystone XL Pipeline to a vote.

The governor promised a pragmatic approach, which is good. Climate change is real, and we must reduce greenhouse gas emissions. But there are broad implications to Brown's notion.

Oil companies are huge taxpayers. Refineries employ union workers. Gas taxes pay for highway maintenance. Somewhat ironically, Brown used his speech to ask legislators to come up with ways to fund a \$59 billion backlog on road and bridge maintenance.

But his focus was the environment, a theme to which he has returned throughout his decades on the public stage. California should get half of its electricity from renewable sources by 2030, he said, up from the current goal of getting a third of its electricity from the sun, wind and other renewable sources by 2020.

"Taking significant amounts of carbon out of our economy without harming its vibrancy is exactly the sort of challenge

at which California excels,” the governor said. “This is exciting, it is bold and it is absolutely necessary if we are to have any chance of stopping potentially catastrophic changes to our climate system.”

California is reducing gasoline use. Experts believe consumption could fall 20% by 2030 under existing law and policies. Further weaning a society that has relied on internal combustion and petroleum for a century would be no small task.

Higher mileage vehicles, electric vehicles, improved battery technology and other types of fuel all could be part of the solution, as could high-speed rail. The state will break ground on the project Tuesday in Fresno, six years after voters approved it.

Brown didn't mention income inequality. But wealth disparity is relevant to any discussion about energy.

Our guess is that in 2030, lower-income people and people whose offices are their pick-up trucks will be the ones driving vehicles that are heavy gas users. Does the governor propose to help them pay for more fuel-efficient vehicles, and, if so, how much might that cost?

The speech was long for Brown, 23 minutes, but short for most politicians. Steeped as he is in this state's history, Brown knows that one ever will give a fourth inaugural in California.

He could be forgiven touches of as nostalgia. He pointed to the spot in the Assembly chambers where he sat he to watch his father's inaugural in 1959, and he introduced family members who are descendents of his great grandfather, California pioneer August Schuckman.

Brown borrowed a line from his 1979 inaugural speech, when he was very much a presidential contender: “California will build for the future, not steal from it. And as we do, we will know in our hearts patriotism is not just defending the country of our fathers, but preparing the land for our children.”

He added a twist 35 years later: “The challenge is to build for the future, not steal from it, to live within our means and to keep California ever golden and creative, as our forebears have shown and our descendants would expect.”

Barring extraordinary political events, Brown won't move beyond California. But he is intent on securing his place in history. There's nothing wrong with that. However, for a politician who hopes to leave a mark that beyond California's borders, details will be important.

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