

New Frontiers for Governor Brown

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When the phone rang at my house at 9 p.m. one Sunday night recently, the very recognizable voice said, “Gloria, this is Jerry Brown.” For an instant, I thought it was a robocall, although I quickly realized that we were not in a political season when recorded phone calls from politicians are common. I knew the call was personal when he said he hoped he wasn’t calling too late.

Governor Brown asked me if The Commonwealth Club would be willing to host meetings, later this year, in which he would be involved, to work on reducing the danger of nuclear war. My answer was yes, of course. We will share more about those interesting activities, as we get closer to the fall when they will take place.

I chatted briefly with Governor Brown about how he will be spending his time post-governorship. He told me he wanted to work on the most important issues—climate change and reducing the danger from nuclear weapons. And it struck me how consistent this extraordinary man has been throughout his career, always focusing on the biggest challenges. His instincts about what is important have been constant and unerring, and he has laid the groundwork for almost four decades of change in several key areas.

The first time I met Jerry Brown was in his office in Sacramento, during his first administration as governor. It was the early 1980s. Several of us sat around informally; he was perched on the edge of his desk. We talked about his ideas about the uses of space, including that California could launch its own satellite. His concept was prescient, although at the time it earned him the unfair nickname of Governor Moonbeam from those who did not understand the science and technology he was discussing.

Last fall, Governor Brown announced a partnership between California and Planet Labs to design and launch a satellite fleet to monitor earth data related to climate change. This is hardly a far-fetched idea today, when satellites provide us with so much important information, and it shows the validity of his idea three decades earlier.

As California’s governor in the late 1970s, Brown was concerned about energy and carbon emissions. Through state legislation, he brought about the nation’s first green building codes, appliance efficiency standards and wind farms. This was three decades before it was common wisdom that energy efficiency and alternative energy sources are crucial to reducing carbon emissions and combatting global warming.

Continuing on this path he embarked upon decades ago, last year Brown signed legislation to make California’s electricity 100-percent

carbon free by 2045. He also pushed ahead California’s high-speed rail project, an electric train system that will reduce carbon emissions.

Jerry Brown has also long been concerned about the danger of nuclear war. He criticized the Cold War nuclear-armed standoff between the United States and the Soviets in his 1980 presidential campaign and called for breakthroughs to reduce the nuclear threat. I heard him continue to express his concerns privately, as the years went on.

Within the last few years, this concern came to the forefront in his mind. He spoke two years ago at Ploughshares Fund, a San Francisco foundation that works to reduce the nuclear threat. Last year, Jerry Brown became executive chair of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, the Chicago organization founded by Manhattan Project scientists that crusades against nuclear weapons and other major threats to humanity. He also joined the board of the Nuclear Threat Initiative,

a Washington organization founded by former U.S. Senator Sam Nunn and funded by Ted Turner and Warren Buffett, among others, which supports practical steps to reduce the dangers from nuclear weapons.

Jerry Brown has the ability to see to the core of things, to identify what is truly important. In every position he’s held, he

has broken down barriers and brought about important change. Even his term as mayor of Oakland launched a renaissance in that city that continues today. I think we have all learned to pay attention when Jerry Brown focuses on a problem.

This is a difficult and dangerous time, when many of the protections against the spread of nuclear weapons are waning. The United States has just withdrawn from a treaty with Russia that banned intermediate-range nuclear weapons. Last year, the Trump administration terminated our anti-nuclear agreement with Iran. Talks with North Korea have resulted in little progress, and their nuclear weapons program continues. The nuclear threat looms as large or larger today than anytime in the past 70 years.

Given the change he has been able to bring about in other areas, it is encouraging that Jerry Brown is focusing on the nuclear problem. We are honored at The Commonwealth Club to provide a venue for this latest effort by our insightful California native son to tackle a big global problem.



Photo by James Meinert

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