

Jerry Brown reminisces on political past, warns of bleak future at Rancho Mirage Writers Festival

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In one of his first public appearances since leaving office, former California Gov. Jerry Brown spoke bluntly about the state of American politics and painted a gloomy picture of the threats posed by climate change and potential nuclear annihilation.

But even though his remarks were bleak, Brown's wry delivery and candor earned him much audience applause and laughter.

Brown sat down with New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd on Thursday in front of a full house in the John Steinbeck room of the Rancho Mirage Public Library & Observatory as part of the sixth annual Rancho Mirage Writers Festival,

The event, which began Tuesday night with a special sit-down between Dowd and actor Tom Hanks, ends Friday.

Brown's one-on-one with Dowd on Thursday was an at-times light and at-other-times deep conversation about the state of politics in 2019.

The 80-year-old former governor covered a range of topics including California's budget, politicians both contemporary and historic, and the Athenian statesman Aristides.

And, despite Dowd's prodding, Brown made it clear he had no intention of running for president.

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"Donald Trump is 72. Joe Biden is 76. Bernie Sanders is 77. Michael Bloomberg is 76. Elizabeth Warren is 69. So, why not get in?" Dowd asked.

Brown said he looked forward to retiring to his Colusa County ranch and had no interest in joining the crowded Democratic primary field, but would speak out to ensure politicians addressed his primary political concerns.

"On the issues that I'm concerned about, particularly climate change and the escalating new nuclear arms race, I'd like to see that in the presidential debate. I haven't seen it there yet in any serious way, so I might have to just stir the pot a bit. Not for myself, but for those other 25 people who're running," Brown said.



Jerry Brown is interviewed by Maureen Dowd in front of an audience from the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival, January 31, 2019. Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun



Jerry Brown speaks at the Rancho Mirage Public Library during the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival, January 31, 2019. Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun

Brown brushed off questions about Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz's third-party presidential bid, and said he was more interested in charging his hybrid car at the Starbucks near his ranch.

But, when Dowd asked him about U.S. Sen. Kamala Harris, D-Calif., who began her campaign for president on Monday in Oakland before an estimated 20,000 people, Brown, who ran for president in 1976, 1980 and 1992, said the initial publicity surrounding Harris bodes well for her campaign.

"She certainly started off with a bang. Having run for president myself three times — she's certainly doing better than I was doing," he said.

Brown gave Schultz, Harris and all the candidates who've launched their presidential bids a piece of advice from his 2010 gubernatorial campaign, when he ran against former Hewlett Packard CEO Meg Whitman. As is his custom, Brown used an obscure historical allegory to illustrate his point. In the 4th Century B.C., Brown said, Athenians grew tired of a politician named Aristides, when his actions became too publicized for too long.

"From that I learned: Don't get overexposed," he said. "[Whitman] spent \$100 million, a lot of it on television, before I spent my first million. So when I did, which was after Labor Day, I became the fresh face of California."

Brown's stories spanned much further back than the 2010 gubernatorial race. At one point, Dowd, who has reported on politics since the 1970s, shared memories of interviewing Brown during one of his presidential primary bids and asking about his father, former California Gov. Pat Brown.

"I remember I asked you once, one of those times you were running for president, about the Brown dynasty and you would say, 'These personal matters are not the stuff of historic change. How much do you know about Mao Zedong's personal life, or Churchill's or Julius Caesar's?'" she said.

Brown, reversing his earlier stance, said facets of politicians' personal lives could be relevant.

"Nobody ever talked about how drunk [Churchill] was at the White House," he said. "That's one of the extraordinary things, that Churchill drank so much and was so effective. That's a very interesting personal point. And I don't drink as much as Churchill and I'm not as effective."

Dowd also pressed Brown about the generation gap in American politics, the young upstarts vs. the veteran politicians.

He commended first-term members of Congress such as Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-New York, for bringing new energy to politics, but wondered whether the enthusiasm would last.

"I think they're what you call catalysts," he said. "Politics is very dead in its cliches, its inauthenticities, its same-old, same-old."

But Brown also stressed the benefits of experience and said former Vice President Joe Biden could potentially be an effective president.

"Anyone under 75 is suspicious," Brown said of politicians. "I've had the experience of being the youngest governor in California and the oldest governor in the country, ever — that's when you really learn stuff, after the third or fourth decade of what you did."

Early in his political career, Brown's persona and liberal political stances earned him the nickname "Governor Moonbeam." But when he returned to the governor's office eight years ago, he developed a reputation for cautious governance and fiscal prudence.

When he entered office in 2011, California's budget was operating at a \$26 billion deficit. But largely due to sustained economic recovery, the state's fiscal fortunes reversed.

In January, when Brown left office, California's budget had a combined \$30 billion of surplus and reserve funds.

His caution — he vetoed one out of every six bills passed by the state legislature in its last session — has earned him scorn from some Democrats, who hope Brown's successor, Gov. Gavin Newsom, will be more willing to increase funding for health care, education and other social programs.

Brown attributed much of his success as governor to timing, saying his tenure benefitted from the longest economic recovery in state history. He then warned that a future downturn is inevitable.

The repercussions of a moderate recession could be particularly severe in California because of the state's tax structure, Brown said.

California's Legislative Analyst's Office forecasts that the current budget surplus could become a \$40 billion deficit during a moderate recession because it relies on personal income tax revenue, which historically has been more volatile during boom and bust cycles.

"We know what goes up must come down. That's the law of gravity and the law of financial gravity is up and down," Brown said. "The time to be cautious is when everything looks great."