PACE

COMMENTARY

Fiscal Inferno (Remix)

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It looks as though the day of reckoning is finally at hand. (See here for background). Governor Brown is set to issue his budget revise next Monday, and then the dogs will be off the leash. In his campaign the Governor promised not to raise taxes without a vote of the people. But Republicans have refused to assent to a referendum on tax extensions, which leaves an all-cuts budget as the Governor's opening move in negotiations with the Legislature. The proposed cuts for schools will be brutal, requiring further reductions in the time that children spend in school, abandonment of limitations on class size, and additional layoffs of teachers and administrators. The proposed cuts for post-secondary education will if anything be worse, shutting out huge numbers of otherwise eligible students from enrollment in college. Democrats and Republicans in the Legislature are already drafting their speeches for delivery after the Governor speaks, denouncing cuts on this scale as unnecessary and unacceptable.

But then what? The Governor and a variety of constituencies including but hardly limited to teachers have tried to increase the political pressure on Republican legislators to agree to tax increases, but the legislators remain unmoved. The cupboard is almost bare when it comes to the kinds of budgetary sleight-of-hand and one-time revenues that the Legislature has used to balance the last few budgets. And the public remains committed to the view that their own taxes should not be raised to pay for schools, even as they insist that educational expenditures should not be cut. Something's gotta give, but what?

There are three ways out of this impasse. The most cheerful but least likely is that the grim picture of California's future portrayed in the Governor's May revise begins to turn public complacency to anger, increasing pressure on Republicans to strike a deal to protect schools, universities, and other valued public institutions. Somewhat more likely is that a mix of cajolery and arm-twisting by the Governor's office and Democrats in the Legislature will convince the necessary four Republicans to abandon their caucus and vote for a budget that includes tax extensions or increases. But an all-cuts budget is a real possibility. The consequences for California's education system will be dire, but we may have to live in the Governor's grim future for a while before citizens demand a change.

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