

# Opinion: Let's face it, California is nuts

By Joe Mathews

My fellow Californians, the state of our state is nuttier than ever.

I know you will hear more conventional assessments of the state of things in the coming weeks. January is the high season for elected officials to offer addresses on how our state is faring—overviews of California and its local governments. And, to be clear, I am not judging the sanity of Californians (we have lower rates of mental illness than the U.S). Nor am I referring merely to the growth in our almond and walnut production.



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I offer my assessment of our essential nuttiness as a starting point for a year in which we will debate and cast votes on our taxes, drug laws, schools, roads, our rails, and water. As we figure things out, let us not lean too heavily on reason, or appeal too often to common sense. After all, this state—with its peculiar history of rapid change—has never been a particularly reasonable or sensible place.

So when things make no sense in the coming year, take comfort in the words of the writer Edward Abbey: “There is science, logic, reason; there is thought verified by experience. And

then there is California.”

We have been so singular for so long that California has become obsessed with singularity—and even afraid of “the singularity,” the idea that artificial intelligences will eventually surpass our own, dooming humanity. When Gov. Jerry Brown gives his own State of the State address, there likely will be a predictable list of California singular-status boasts: as a leader in renewable energy, high-speed rail, protecting undocumented immigrants, and fighting climate change.

Such policies are to be celebrated. They also are the fruits of our perceived nuttiness—other states have rejected high-speed rail cap-and-trade for greenhouse gas emissions as irretrievably wacky ideas.

You won't hear this month's official speechmakers talk about the other half of the nut—the way our nuttiness can turn on itself.

Ours is a state of creative communities and people that is ruled from Sacramento via the most centralized regime of regulation and taxation in the United States.

California has the highest percentage of its population living in poverty of any state in the country, and yet our leaders pursue policies that give us some of the most expensive electricity, gas, and housing in America. We embrace freedom and restrict it in the same breath. Californians are on our way to legalizing marijuana—but good luck finding a place in the state where you can smoke it, or anything else. The state is pioneering self-driving cars—even as we let our roads deteriorate into impassable messes.

We've led the way in expanding health insurance for poor people—roughly half of our children are now on Medi-Cal, California's version of Medicaid—but at the same time, we've made it harder for people to see a doctor and get treatment.

California desperately needs more college graduates—we'll be short a million skilled workers by the middle of the next decade—so, naturally, we've been under-funding public higher education and limiting enrollment in our colleges.

We Californians also have a nutty weakness for empty and extravagant promises. We spend years on Elon Musk's waiting lists for Teslas he can never seem to deliver in the promised numbers. We invest billions in the trivial—how many online coupon companies and photo-sharing apps does one state need? And we overdo it. CalPERS wants to lower its expected rate of investment return to 6.5 percent (just a year after it said it could guarantee 7.5 percent). Our governments are still offering billions in retiree health care—without setting aside money to fund it—even in an age when Medicare and Obamacare should cover all.

This year, you'll hear lots of big talk about how we'll reform our crazily complicated criminal justice and tax systems. We should reform, though we probably won't. A place as nutty as this needs simpler rules, not 5,000 separate criminal provisions and over 400 penalty enhancements.

I could go on—take note that I've gone this far in a column about California nuttiness without once mentioning San Francisco—but what's the point? While our nuttiness has its costs, California will survive. And we'll cope, as we always do, by celebrating how crazily creative we are.

As Compton's Kendrick Lamar will rap at this new year's Grammys when he wins a boatload of awards, "We gon' be alright. Do you hear me, do you feel me? We gon' be alright."

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