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John Cox, in Beast Mode at Shelter Island, Echoes Reagan, Defends Campaign Bear

by Ken Stone

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https://youtu.be/_IrVrKoCkYU

In 1951, Ronald Reagan starred in “Bedtime for Bonzo,” featuring a chimpanzee. Despite that, he became governor of California — and the 40th U.S. president.

Seventy years later, John Cox seeks the same Golden State luck with the help of a 9-year-old Kodiak brown bear.

The Rancho Santa Fe businessman, running for governor three years after being thumped, trotted out Tag the Hollywood bear Tuesday at Shelter Island a week after the 1,000-pound subspecies of Grizzly made his campaign debut at Sacramento’s Miller Regional Park.

“I’m not a pretty boy — although my wife thinks I’m OK,” Cox told a parking lot press conference with animal activists heckling from a grassy rise nearby. “Make no mistake. It’s going to take big beastly changes to get this job done, and that’s why the bear is here today.”

So was the Gipper.

Asked how he’d enact his agenda amid a Democratic supermajority in Sacramento, Cox said he would “do what Ronald Reagan did.”

“I’ll try to give commonsense solutions the first day in office,” he said. “I’m going to call a special session to talk about housing. That’s my business — build and manage apartments for a living.”

Saying he knows what it takes to build at a lower cost, Cox vowed to propose a package of changes.

“If the Legislature insists on keeping the cost of housing so outrageously high, I’ll go around them and talk to the people directly and get them on my side,” he said. “And they’ll force the changes. The people know what’s going on.”

Several reporters challenged Cox on what he admitted was an “attention-getting device.”

One asked: “Aren’t you concerned that right out of the gate [the bear act] upset a lot of people?”

Said Cox: “I don’t live under the perception that everybody’s going to agree with everything I do. ... I’m an animal lover. I believe in taking care of animals. God gave them to us to enjoy this paradise on Earth.”

He noted “this animal” has been on TV series and appeared in an NFL halftime show.

KGTV-Channel 10’s Mary McKenzie told him the event felt “a little Teddy Rooseveltesque. Only Teddy wouldn’t have had the electric fence,” a few low strands surrounding the area in front of Cox’s branded bus.

“It’s not electrified,” Cox said. “But he thinks it is.”

Bearing down, McKenzie asked how long Tag would stick around.

“I gotta be honest,” she said. “We’re all watching the bear right now — and at some point, who’s listening to the message when he’s here?”

Cox said the bear helped him get world attention, especially on Newsom the Beauty vs. Cox the Beast. (Some 18 TV commercials are planned to hammer home the contrasts, he said.)

“I’m not a celebrity,” he said. “I haven’t been on a reality TV show for years” — a smack at GOP rival [Caitlyn Jenner](#) of the Kardashian clan. “I haven’t been in politics forever. But we gotta get past that — past name recognition as the qualification for serving in public office.”

That's not the only thing he wanted to get past.

Times of San Diego asked Cox whether he would acknowledge that Joe Biden was legitimately elected president.

"Of course," Cox quickly said. "And I think the elections were legitimate. ... But the point is we have to focus on California issues. This is not about the partisan battles of the past."

What does he say to California Republicans who still believe the election was stolen?

Cox: "We've got to move past that and solve the problems of California. Let's get away from bitter partisanship. You know, this country is divided, no question. Let's move on. Let's talk about the problems in the here and now — about getting our kids education, about getting them affordable housing, about getting homeless people the help they need."

He was pressed to give his reaction to the Jan. 6 Capital insurrection.

I disagreed with it," he said. "Along with millions of other people."

Disagreeing with Cox's use of a bear were a handful of animal activists.

Bobbi Brink, founder and director of Lions, Tigers and Bears animal sanctuary in Alpine, said she came to educate Cox "that we don't need to use live animals to win a campaign."

She called such spectacles a thing of the past.

"We have animatronics and many other ways to show animals without abusing an animal," she said, contending "the public doesn't know how many thousands of these animals are used, abused and dumped."

A bear would normally stay with its mother for a year and a half or so, she said.

"Animals like this are pulled from their mama before their eyes are even open for no other reason that they can train them to do things like this," Brink said. "It's just wrong. ... The lucky ones end up at in a sanctuary like mine here in San Diego."

A San Diego County resident who gave only her first name — Michele — peppered the end of the half-hour conference with shouts of "Cox, you don't need a bear for your campaign," "You can talk beastly without a bear" and "If you love animals, let him free."

She also said: "I'm a Republican, too" but later told a reporter she's registered as an independent.

And Cox?

"I'm a beast when it comes to corruption, waste and inefficiency," he said. "And that's what we have in the state in Sacramento. My ambition is to fix this state — make it affordable and livable for people."