Jerry Brown reclaimed California's governorship Monday and delivered a tough-love message to its residents, its politicians and its countless interest groups: It's time to grow up and get real.

"At this stage of my life, I have not come here to embrace delay and denial," the 72-year-old former governor declared as he was inaugurated.

He warned everyone that he'll propose "a tough budget for tough times" that will require sacrifice from every spending interest group.

Brown's bluntly worded address, and the bare-bones inaugural ceremony itself, hit just the right notes of serious purpose for a state mired in the deepest recession since the Great Depression and an electorate that holds its political officeholders in deep – and much justified – disdain.

A traditional inaugural celebration would have been gauche and counterproductive.

"In this crisis, we simply have to learn to work together, as Californians first, members of a political party second," Brown said in his 16-minute inaugural speech.

While he offered no specifics on how he'll propose to close the state's seemingly perpetual budget deficit – those will be coming in the next week – it's evident that he wants to hit virtually every spending sector in hopes of motivating the Capitol's entrenched interests to seek compromise and band together to persuade voters to provide more tax revenue.

Brown, it appears, will propose a two-track budget, one that slashes spending sharply and another with even greater cuts if voters refuse to raise taxes, or at least retain some temporary income, sales and auto taxes that are expiring.

All of this will happen – or not – very quickly because Brown wants to have a tax election no later than June so that a 2011-12 budget can be finalized.

Proposition 25, approved by voters in November, gives Brown and the Legislature's majority Democrats the power to pass a budget without Republican votes. Some Republicans believe there is a provision in the state constitution that could be used to place taxes on the ballot without their votes as well.
Brown's greatest barrier may be his fellow Democrats in the Legislature, who have very close political ties to the groups – such as public employee unions – that would be most opposed to any deep spending cuts, especially if it meant a permanent reset.

They will want temporary cuts at most, hoping that an eventual uptick in the economy would close the income-outgo gap. But unless the spending cuts are credible, it will be very difficult, perhaps impossible, to persuade voters to raise taxes, even if they are structured to go to local governments as part of a realignment of state-local relationships.

Brown, declaring "the public holds state government in such low esteem," set a high standard of credibility Monday.

Maintaining it will be his most difficult task.