Ever heard of "hopium"? That's the drug California lawmakers are on whenever they sit down to craft a state budget. They're addicted.

They decide what they need, they get out their Ouija board and, while in a hope-induced stupor, they pass a budget, which naturally looks fantastic because, like the bar patron at closing time, everything looks great when you're too drunk to know better.

The morning hangover follows with phrases like: "Optimistic projections"; "Not as high as expected"; "Lower than hoped for"; "Failed to materialize"; "Gap between projected revenues and anticipated expenditures."

We know the basic working parts: A budget deficit that went from $9.2 billion in January to $15.7 billion last week, and the nonpartisan Legislative Analyst's Office said it could rise even higher.

We also know the systemic problems: a Legislature at loggerheads, revenue streams dependent on highly volatile taxation metrics, and citizens passing pie-in-the-sky initiatives with crippling unintended consequences, making them no better than the lawmakers they despise.

But a simple lesson lies in what Gov. Jerry Brown said to Charlie Rose on "CBS This Morning" last Friday.

Rose asked him, "What happened?"

"Very simple," Brown said. "We're not fortunetellers. We don't have clairvoyance."

Then why does everyone keep basing budgets on future projections that are overly optimistic?

It's like that unemployed guy who buys a boat with the money he'll be making from that job he expects to be getting, which then fails to materialize because nobody was hiring.

Except that in the inverted world of politics, the bank can't repossess a boat from government. There are, however, people the government can target.
Brown's $8 billion in proposed cuts target welfare, child care, higher education, the courts, health care for the poor, and state worker compensation.

The cuts will pass, not because they must, but so lawmakers can say they're serious about deficits, thinking it'll bolster their ensuing, far-more-important sales pitch: The passage of a November tax increase. And they'll have an added weapon in that fight: You.

Think about it: How much contact does the average voter really have with state government?

If you're not in prison or on welfare, if you're not on Medi-Cal or in a nursing home, or if you're not in the courts, you won't feel the cuts the governor has proposed.

The trigger cuts to education, though, affect a broader electorate, and I suspect that's one reason why Brown didn't touch it this time around. Instead, between June and November, education will stand alone against the budget ax, and lawmakers will be able to use $6 billion in trigger cuts like a hammer to frighten voters into passing Brown's tax initiative.

Feeling manipulated? Imagine if they hadn't passed that balanced budget last year. Lucky us: Democratic leaders John A. Pérez and Darrell Steinberg pledge to have a balanced budget in place this year, too. And while the new budget may cut costs for our courts – cuts California Chief Justice Tani Cantil-Sakauye said would seriously compromise the public's access to due process throughout the state – surely that very nice Mr. Pérez fellow will have the judicial access necessary to sue the state again if someone tries to deny the Legislature its pay for failing to produce that "balanced" budget.

I can't tell what's harder for these guys: trying to fix the budget or trying to protect their careers by coming up with creative ways to get more money out of us without us complaining about it.

It's like a loan shark, the guy they borrow money from that they can never pay back because the "vig" (vigorous) – street parlance for the interest rate – is uncompromisingly high. It's a total sham, but the average dockworker or storekeeper – or state government – falls right into it. Once they borrow money from the loan shark, the shark's got them. When they fall behind, they find another loan shark to borrow from so they can pay their first debt, and when they fall behind with the second loan shark, they find a third. It's a temporary solution, and they can't catch up. And what happens when they can't pay? They catch a beating.

The problem with the state is that there's no one to break their legs. That's why they keep getting away with toking up on hopium.

So while you may now know what they're smoking the next time you ask, "What the heck are they smokin' down there?" wouldn't it be nice if – just once – they spent the money they had instead of the money they think they're going to have? Sadly, that's a habit too tough to break, and for an addict like California, it may be too late for rehab.