

Comments - John H. Chichester
Virginia Free
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I'm honored to be with you today and view this as an opportunity to have an open and frank discussion about the need for change in Virginia and how we can support that change.

Virginia's business leaders have always played a role in Virginia politics, albeit a role that has evolved over time. Back when I first ran for public office, it was local business leaders who took the initiative to identify promising candidates and convince them to put their hat in the ring.

Candidates who emerged through this process were seasoned and tested. They were problem solvers who had demonstrated their worth through community service or business acumen – they were people whose lives did not center on politics but rather people who were willing to enter the political arena and **share the lessons of their lives for the good of the people.**

As you might imagine, the maturity embedded in this process brought a large block of common-sense Republicans and common-sense Democrats together in Richmond. In those days, I often said it was hard to tell the difference between a Virginia Democrat and a Virginia Republican because both valued open, reasoned discourse and civility to resolve differences and find solutions.

There was willingness by the old guard to teach newcomers the intricacies of state government and to promote open dialogue, with an eye toward continuity. The goal was good public policy, without regard to which political party was in power.

I was a beneficiary of that mindset as Democratic leaders like Ed Willey and Hunter Andrews provided me with the opportunity to learn and to have a real voice in the workings of the Senate Finance Committee.

Those leaders understood that the pendulum always swings and the best legacy they could leave was an informed Senate that could work together to solve problems for the people.

Unfortunately, the mindset began to change in the late 80's and into the 90's as political parties became more inward focused and installed "professional" political staff **whose primary goal was to accentuate differences rather than bring people together.** Words like control and discipline replaced reason and compromise.

No longer were business leaders asked to help find the best candidates – they were only asked to help pay for the political apparatus.

We saw fewer and fewer grass roots candidates whose motivation was public service and loyalty to Virginia's citizens; rather we saw a wave of candidates who were hand-picked by the political apparatus based on loyalty to the party rather than to the people.

This shift has made all the difference in terms of where we find ourselves today and our **inability** to put Virginia's future first.

We no longer have camaraderie across party lines where members leave their differences at the door and sit down to share dinner and dialogue. We are left with a General Assembly that is unduly influenced by those who take extreme positions, do not tolerate different points of view, and place little value on facts. It is a situation that leads to gridlock as we have seen time and again in recent years.

It also is a situation that is not representative of Virginians' views because most Virginia voters lean toward the middle. Virginia is a fiscally conservative state, socially moderate and fiercely independent.

Voters desire and expect legislators in both parties to work together for the common good and to avoid politicizing every issue. They expect to be told the truth and when that happens, they will help solve our problems. The Party that listens to the voters rather than to extremists within its ranks ultimately will achieve the leadership position. The political pendulum seeks out that balance. We are in the midst of such a swing.

In my view, Virginia is a microcosm of what we saw on November 4th. Our citizens have been patient and tolerant, but they are tired of inaction. They want elected leaders who will make decisions that are relevant to their daily lives and which protect the future for their children.

As this pendulum swings in Virginia, we have a real opportunity – the opportunity to bring back the **deliberative body** that I once knew – a General Assembly that places Virginia's future ahead of partisan politics. But the opportunity rests on our ability to elect candidates who reflect Virginians' balanced, common-sense leaning.

It isn't enough to have a Governor who reaches across the aisle and seeks consensus. It isn't enough to have a reasonable and balanced contingent in **one** chamber of the General Assembly. The only way to move Virginia forward is to have a **reasonable and balanced contingent in both chambers of the General Assembly**. Only then can we avoid the gridlock of recent years and return to dialogue rather than demagoguery.

You as business leaders have a central role to play in this movement!

If you will permit me to digress for a moment, I've thought back to the last two times we chatted – in the fall of 2001 and the fall of 2003. Both times, our discussion centered on the need for legislators to look beyond their individual terms of office and make longer-range investment decisions that would secure Virginia's future.

Finding a sustainable transportation "fix" was a key part of both discussions.

And yet, I stand here seven years later in one instance and five years later in the other with no transportation "fix" in sight.

The only measure advanced was the ill-fated 2007 transportation plan with its abusive driver fees that were abhorred by the public and since repealed, a regional taxing structure ruled unconstitutional, and the diversion of millions of general fund dollars to support debt on \$3.0 billion in transportation bonds. As the severity of the current economic downturn sinks in, the sting of that decision will be evident. More than ever, I know my vote against that flawed transportation plan was the right thing to do.

But, the painful reality is that we are left with vital unfinished business in transportation and the legitimate question of how it can be resolved after seven years of churning.

This is where you as business leaders can reclaim the position of influence that is rightfully yours.

Next year will bring statewide elections and elections for the House of Delegates. Now I know that some of you will say – “John, you’re meddling.” But, I must respectfully suggest that as we approach these elections, you should not allow yourselves to be used as a blank check with no assurance of a return on your investment.

You are taking that risk when you make donations to a PAC that is established for general “Party building” as opposed to a PAC that is established for a specific purpose that you support. Let’s face it, a lot of that general PAC money goes wayward. After the political consultants are paid, PAC dollars can flow down to the most inept candidates, just to increase the Party numbers. These could be people who you would never choose to support.

As successful business leaders, you are an integral part of the process and don’t have to accept this empty role. Instead of writing a \$5,000 check to a general-purpose PAC, why not write \$500 checks to candidates of your choice. And before you write that check, make the candidate sit down with you and explain what he is all about.

This path would serve a twofold benefit. It would help to reduce the outlandish cost of political campaigns -- what better time to do that than these lean economic times.

But, more importantly, **it would ensure that your dollars are supporting an individual who will focus on the priorities that you think are important for Virginia.**

Quite frankly, I don’t see an exit from the morass we are in until we elect a sufficient compliment of **reasonable, independent thinkers** to **each chamber** of the General Assembly **so alliances crucial to good governance can be formed.** Only then will we move away from governing by caucus and explaining away our failures through perfumed press releases.

You are in a unique position to find these candidates who can make the difference – be they Democratic, Republican or Independent. Your reach of power and influence extends to every corner of this Commonwealth, and you witness what is happening “on the ground” in your communities. **Our citizens need for you to become proactive in the recruitment process.**

There is only one litmus test that a candidate for the General Assembly should pass – the test of loyalty and dedication to Virginia and her future.

That test can be met only by leaders who: (1) listen and seek input from all quarters; (2) share knowledge with one another; (3) base decisions on facts and careful analysis; (4) think independently and tell the truth; (5) act with civility; and (6) embrace reasonable thinking and bipartisan action in the interest of all Virginians.

The “D”, “R”, or “I” behind the candidate’s name is not important – it is the essence of the man or woman and his promise to serve for the right reasons that makes all the difference.

I implore you to help find such people. There is no greater contribution that you can make to our great Commonwealth.

Thank you for letting me share my thoughts.