

Inaugural address
of

Charles W. Gates

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Inaugural Message

Mr. President, Gentlemen of the General Assembly:

Our Constitution provides for a government of three departments—legislative, executive, and judicial—with functions separate and distinct, and yet, the departments are so related that they are dependent upon each other. Especially is this true of the legislative and executive departments which we today represent in this Joint Assembly, convened according to our Constitution and time-honored custom.

In exercising the privilege of addressing you today, I shall be very brief, and shall only in a general way refer to the work that is before us. Let me at the outset emphasize the importance of our keeping constantly in mind the fact that we have been elected by the people whose servants we are, and by whom our acts will be judged. While our election by the people for this purpose is an honor rightly to be appreciated, yet, nothing short of a full realization of our responsibility to them, and the conscientious discharge of our duty will bring us an honorable acquittal at their hands. To this end our best thought and application is essential.

Never before have the voters of the state taken more active notice of the acts of its public servants than at the present time. Increased publicity of all matters relating to legislative and executive action creates familiarity with state problems, and this in turn results in decided opinions—opinions varying widely on almost every question of importance, which often makes the discovery of the proper solution a very difficult task—difficult because oft times opinions most vigorously expressed may lead us astray. It is sometimes our highest duty to oppose what might seem overwhelming public opinion. We are here to deliberate, to weigh the facts, to legislate wisely. We must also take into account the rapid change that has occurred in business, social, and political ideas. So rapid has been this change that some basic principles are in danger of being swept aside to satisfy the popular will. One of the most evident manifestations of this change is the tendency to place upon the central government many varied powers and responsibilities that heretofore rested with the people themselves. Just how far we, as a state, should go towards parental government, will be the question often to be considered in our deliberations, and our determinations will require our wisest judgment.

By such a government, some things can be done better, more thoroughly, and more economically than by the people, or towns direct. We find by experience that the state should take charge in a very large measure of our public safety, of our courts, and police powers, and of our public health, and to a certain degree, of our schools, and state highways.

On the other hand, I believe we will all agree that it would be most unfortunate to have our people entirely relieved of the active responsibilities of citizenship with the exception of the election of the necessary officials. Such a condition, it seems to me, would destroy the greatest safeguard we have to our body politic—individual activity, responsibility and independence. Vermont has not gone far astray in this matter, and has wisely chosen a course between the two extremes. To emphasize this point by way of illustration, let me refer to our highway department—the department with which I am most familiar. For several years there has been an irresistible demand that the state assume more complete control of the construction and maintenance of our principal highways. This we have gradually done during the last eight years making an advance at each session, not by taking over our state roads entirely and bonding the state for their construction as other states have done, but by retaining the town as the unit, recognizing the towns as partners and aiding liberally such as will help themselves, thus encouraging individual effort and stimulating town pride, until every town in the state but two have taken advantage of the law at some time since its passage. This plan is producing live, competent road men in every part of the state, and has developed a growing healthy sentiment, which no doubt has resulted in a greater improvement for the money expended than would have been possible under complete state control.

The tendency towards a larger degree of state control in this and in other departments brings forcibly to our attention the matter of state expense. This has steadily grown in volume during the past ten years, and has been given wide publicity. By some this increase is deemed too large from every standpoint; by others it is deemed none too large, if value is received.

A careful perusal of the reports of the different state departments will reveal the fact that almost every department is growing, and many of them will need larger appropriations, if we permit their growth and meet the demands.

Vermont is not backward in its views. Our people will not balk at expense that is necessary. They do not want to go without those things that build for a better citizenship, or for the state's best prosperity. We need not hesitate to build well for Vermont—as well as our finances will permit. But this fact confronts us in our deliberations—this year is about the turning point in our state financial situation, where increased expenditures from whatever cause will have to be met by a direct state tax. Rigid economy is absolutely essential to a favorable balance sheet. Every unnecessary expense should be cut out, and items of new expense to the state should be carefully scrutinized, even though their purpose is entirely laudable and desirable. I am reminded here of the phrase in our State Constitution, which reads “And previous to any law being made to raise a tax, the purpose for which it is to be raised ought to appear evident to the legislature to be of more service to the community than the money would be if not collected.”

This might well be our guide in making appropriations. I am quite confident that the good judgment of this body can be depended upon to handle this matter satisfactorily.

The expense of our meeting here is heavy under the most favorable circumstances, this fact should not, however, deter us from the fullest deliberation over all important measures. Inadequate or ill considered legislation might be productive of more harm to the state than increased expense.

Let us each endeavor to eliminate all unnecessary legislation, and undue delay of proper legislation. Let us claim credit for the number of bills we *do not* introduce, rather than the number we *do* introduce. In short, let this session, the first to be held under the change in our Constitution, be conspicuous for the quality of its work completed in the shortest time consistent with thoroughness, and we will best serve the state, and our efforts are certain to be appreciated.

I deem it unwise at this time to go into detail on the various subjects that will engross our attention, such as direct primary, workmens' compensation, the judiciary, education, agriculture, and such changes in our statutes as are necessary to conform to our changed Constitution. Educational matters on account of their importance will demand our special attention, and, in this connection, let me refer to the most liberal proposal which we have received from the Hon. Theodore N. Vail, of Lyndonville, who offers the Lyndon Agricultural School and Speedwell Farms; fully equipped, as a free gift to the state for educational purposes. Your favorable consideration of this offer is most earnestly recommended.

I will be glad to communicate with you later as occasion may require, and in connection with all these matters I promise you my best efforts, and I shall need your kind consideration and assistance. I request you individually to give me at any time such views as you may wish to express on legislation of importance.

I extend to you my hearty good wishes for the successful outcome of this session.

At the conclusion of the message the Governor withdrew and the Joint Assembly dissolved.

GUY W. BAILEY,
Secretary of State, Clerk.