

Farewell address
of
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Farewell Address

Farewell Message of Outgoing Governor

“Mr. President, Mr. Speaker, Members of this General Assembly and of the Administration, and fellow citizens:

“Six years ago, I was escorted into this Chamber by Rip Hathorn, known to us all as ‘Mr. Doorkeeper.’

“As I took my brother’s arm and stepped across the threshold from private citizen to Governor of the State of Vermont, I took a deep breath.

“In a few hours, I will exhale.

“But right now, as I bid you farewell, I sharply draw in my breath again, not because I brace myself for the future, but because I feel the tug of memory, and it touches my heart.

“I tell myself that this farewell speech is but a formal procedure, part of the process of succession which has occurred time and time again here at this podium, as one Governor gave his farewell in the morning and the newly-elected Governor was sworn in that afternoon.

“I would like to take this opportunity to wish Dick Snelling well, when he steps up to this podium to take the oath of office. I know my husband joins me in extending a welcome to him and Barbara.

“One cannot help but marvel at how easily this transition from one administration to another is accomplished in an experienced and confident democracy.

“Such an orderly transfer of power has occurred 73 times in our history. It is hard to consider it unusual.

“But when I reflect on these six years, they are unusual, both in the life of this state, and in my own life.

“Vermont has been extraordinarily good to me and to my family. When my mother and my brother and I arrived on the S.S. Manhattan on June 10, 1940, in New York Harbor, and we caught an early morning glimpse of the Statue of Liberty, little did I think that her torch was held high for me.

“Place of birth, religion, gender, none of these proved to be insurmountable barriers. Only in Vermont could the usual stereotypes fade into the background, a state where the people give each one of us a chance to prove who we are, by what we say and what we do.

“I thank you, Vermont, for having given me this chance to be your Governor, and for having accepted me as tolerantly and at times, as lovingly, as you did.

“I would like to publicly express my deeply-felt thanks to my staff, and to all the members of our administration. They are a very special group of women and men who care very much about the state they serve.

“We’ve been a happy family, with lively dinner table debates, united by a powerful common vision of Vermont, one that is shared by the several thousand men and women who work for the State of Vermont.

“And as I stand here before you, I thank the members of this General Assembly, and those who have served in prior Legislatures, who day-by-day, bill-by-bill, vote-by-vote, worked with us. And at this mellow moment, I would also like to thank those of you who worked against us. As a result, we worked a little harder, and perhaps, a little better.

“A special camaraderie exists amongst those of us who have sat in these seats under this splendid Golden Dome.

“We have celebrated heady victories, and commiserated over lonely defeats. All our human foibles, emotions and values are displayed on this brilliant stage: greed and generosity, coldness and compassion, seriousness and, thank goodness, humor.

“The Freshmen amongst you will be initiated shortly.

“This morning I reminisce about all the times you have formed a delegation to escort me into the well of this House.

“Thanks to you, I have not walked alone.

“There is great symbolism in the processions we have formed. We have achieved so much together along the way, walking the same paths more often than not. Each time I ascended these steps by myself, parting from you here at the base, I knew I could not have gotten here without you.

“As I look back, it is when we worked together that we were at our best.

“That is how we have come so far in these six years, moving to the head of the class in so many important areas; today, Vermont is the #1 state in the country for children’s services, for the environment, and for mental health services. And we are ranked 1 of the top 10 education states in the nation.

“These accomplishments were only achieved with enormous hard work, and a careful investment of our resources.

“I firmly believe it is these investments which will sustain our strength in hard times, and will also create the springboard for our strong economic recovery.

“I ask you, would any company expand its job opportunities or seek to locate in a state which ranked 47th in the nation in teachers’ salaries? That’s where we were.

“Today, we rank 26th.

“Would new jobs be created in a state which did not even provide kindergarten for all of its children? That was the case in 1984, when 60 school districts had no public kindergartens.

“Doubling the funding for education, creating an education partnership with business, initiating 45 early childhood programs, learning through interactive television, revamping vocational and technical education for the year 2000, these are the critical public investments in Vermont’s future.

“Tomorrow’s jobs will go to those states who have developed their brain power, and Vermont will be ready because in good economic times, we invested our wealth in our children, and it is they who will bring us the greatest rewards.

“I have placed great emphasis on education in these six years, both in money and time; I visited just about every school in the state, some more than once.

“I did so because I believe that education is the single most powerful tool for personal growth and economic security.

“As education changed my life, it is changing the lives of Vermont children.

“My determination to improve our schools was strengthened one winter night when I was invited to Wolcott to speak about the proposed foundation plan to redistribute state education aid.

“Wolcott’s townspeople had just voted to build a new school, and now they questioned whether or not they could afford it. Should they rescind the vote? That was the question.

“I listened. These people wanted the best for their children, but they did not have the means to provide it.

“I promised them I would help them get their new school.

“And that is a promise you and I kept.

“It was called the foundation plan. It brought us closer to the goal of providing an equally good education for all of Vermont’s children, regardless of whether they live in Shelburne or Wolcott.

“And last year, we raised taxes to keep our commitment in place.

“Think of the investment we have made in mental health. Six years ago, our state hospital was refused accreditation, and our community mental health services were in disarray.

“Today, we are a model for the nation.

“Together, we have worked to weave together some of the torn fabric of society, through the Reach-up program, access to pre-natal care, health care for children, an innovative corrections system. 12 parent/child centers, the youth conservation corps and a unique center for the treatment and prevention of sexual abuse.

“Six years ago none of these programs existed. Only 900 children were in subsidized day care; today there are more than 3,000.

“Why did we make these investments in families and children? Because that is how we build a strong and stable society.

“I was personally determined to take steps to strengthen Vermont families, because as a candidate, I had been haunted by the lingering vision of the scenes I had witnessed along the parade routes I had traveled.

“The parade route in any Vermont town is instructive, if you know where to look.

“I marched past houses with pretty geraniums in the windows and neatly-trimmed lawns. The families, sometimes three generations, were seated in their lawn chairs by the curb, all in a row, smiling, waving. They looked perfect.

“But then I walked past a three-story wooden structure in the center of town and spotted a pale young girl, no more than twelve years old, holding her arms straight out, as if she were carrying a tray. Her arms held a newborn baby, draped in a gray-white blanket.

“Nothing was perfect here, not the sagging balcony, not the sad child, not the tiny baby.

“I vowed I would find a way to do something to help that child and her baby, and others like her.

“And we did.

“Not long ago, a young woman approached me in Poultney and said, ‘I want to thank you for the Reach-up program, I’m going to Castleton now, and it’s changed my life.’

“That is what we did together.

“And it is that woman’s changed life which will make all the difference for the future of Vermont; a young woman who will be self-supporting, who will be better educated, and who will pass that confidence on to her children.

“As I think back on these six years, I recall the environmental crisis we were in. The citizens of Williamstown were alarmed because of the chemical contamination of their water, Lake Champlain was deteriorating because of pollution, and there was not a glimpse of a policy to deal with solid waste, with leaking underground storage tanks, or with hazardous waste.

“Today, they are all in place, and Vermont is a widely acknowledged national environmental leader.

“Most recently, we led the way in developing a comprehensive energy plan for the year 2000.

“Six years ago, we were in the midst of an agricultural crisis and hundreds of farmers filled this Chamber asking for help.

“And when the federal government ignored their plea, Vermont responded. By refinancing debt, easing property tax burdens, providing agricultural loans and purchasing development rights, we have, in fact, ‘saved’ hundreds of Vermont family farms.

“And then, there is Act 200.

“This is how we will shape our future, as we, the citizens of Vermont, envision it. And Act 200, as unveiled in last week’s state agency plans, will also make our government more accountable to the people. I urge you to protect and nurture it.

“Not very long ago, we had no state housing policy, and no ability to save farms and conserve land.

“Today, the innovative Housing and Conservation Trust Fund has helped save and construct over 1,700 units of affordable housing.

“And in the last six years, we have protected, for the enjoyment and use of future generations, an amazing total of 32,000 acres, approximately the combined size of the towns of Burlington, South Burlington, Shelburne and Winooski.

“Have we invested well in Vermont’s future? Yes we have.

“We have acted on the belief that we owe the next generation its Vermont heritage. We could not afford to squander it by inaction or neglect

“And we have taken these actions while the federal government retreated and virtually abandoned its domestic agenda.

“If our people were to be housed, we had to do it; if the environment was to be protected, it was our initiative; and if our families were to be strengthened, we had to find the way.

“I am proud that we stepped in, not simply with programs and dollars, but with compassion, with conviction, and with ideas that worked.

“And at the same time, we took a broad approach. We helped create more jobs and improved Vermonters’ standard of living; we are no longer a poor state, nor are we a high-tax state.

“And in these difficult economic times, I am proud to leave the State of Vermont in a position of economic soundness, better equipped than any other New England state to cope with what may be a prolonged and deep recession.

“Our position is affirmed by our double A bond rating which stated:

“‘Vermont’s adherence to generally conservative financial and debt policies has been the source of its credit strength.’

“One unique characteristic of this administration has also been the presence of women in key positions, in unprecedented numbers. The participation of women, along with the strong support of like-minded men, has helped establish a family court, a maternal leave policy, and access to pre-natal care.

“But most importantly, the rich talents that women bring to the political process have been tapped, and that expanded talent pool benefits all Vermonters.

“Having the experience of being Governor for six activist years, how do I see the future?

“Some words of caution and some words of hope.

“In this Bicentennial year, as we celebrate our statehood, it is time to question once again just how much statehood do we want?

“What is the function of government in the 21st Century, particularly in Vermont, a state which prides itself on its individualism and independence, which has never forgotten its youthful years as a scrappy independent republic?

“What is our responsibility to individualism, to ourselves, and where do we draw the line between self-interest and the common interest?

“Where is the line of demarcation between our land during our lifetime, and the land our children and their children will walk upon? Certainly, this was the central debate in Act 200; ownership or stewardship.

“And what is our responsibility to one another? Where do we draw the line between taking care of our needs, and turn to help a neighbor, or even, a stranger?

“There are no simple or final answers to these questions, but if we are to continue to protect our natural heritage and to value our humanity, we must constantly ask them, and strive for clear answers.

“I came to this country as an immigrant and worked my way through college. I could easily conclude that I climbed up the ladder by myself.

“But I didn’t. I got my education because of the low tuition at the University of Massachusetts, and my husband was educated by the G.I. bill.

“Government has traditionally helped people like me up the ladder; it is not a new idea.

“What is new is how we do it in this time and place.

“In a democracy, we will always experience that tension between individualism and the common good, between less government and more; this debate keeps us vital and dynamic, and it’s been going on for 200 years.

“We must also be more realistic about how we pay for the government we want.

“To achieve universal health care, property tax reform, higher quality public education, and a more affordable college education, we must face political reality and stop perpetuating the myth that our constituents can have it all without paying for it.

“Both liberals and conservatives have to face that reality.

“Liberals have to acknowledge that it is impossible to reap a multi-million windfall to fund these services simply by taxing the rich more.

“Even greater tax progressivity will not produce sufficient funds to meet these needs.

“And conservatives have to stop saying we can have it all if we just curb waste and abuse and set our priorities straight. It is time that we become courageous realists and make the hard choices.

“A word of caution on the environment. It will be tempting, in difficult economic times, to reduce our environmental commitment, in the belief that environmental protection stifles economic growth.

“I urge you to reject the temptation.

“Vermont has proven again and again that investment in a healthy, clean and beautiful environment brings long-term economic benefits, and those who fail to make that environmental investment pay a high price.

“Our billboard law, bottle law, and Act 250 are widely respected, not only by environmentalists, but also by the business community. And the recent agreements with Killington provide a stunning example of the win/win strategy which results in both economic growth and conservation.

“Words of hope: in these unsettling times, when the winds of war chill us, and when the economic news worries us, we have to restore confidence in our very ability to cope with change.

“We in Vermont have what so few parts of the country, or for that matter, the world have — we know who we are.

“We are a community. And from that we draw strength.

“When the 131st Reserve Unit was called up to go to Saudi Arabia, the state turned into one small village again. The outpouring of affection, of support, was extraordinary. Not only from relatives and friends, where you would expect to see it, but from strangers, and on the most impersonal infrastructure of them all, the interstate highway.

“I-89, a mere number of a place, was festooned with flags, hand-scrawled signs, and expressions of hope, of prayer, and of messages which said: you are not alone, we are with you. We were united in our caring, regardless of our differing views on the Persian Gulf crisis.

“Vermont is a community where, when a family is stricken with Aids, the town holds a fair, and the most dreadful of tragedies is not suffered alone.

“This is Vermont.

“This was the Vermont of 200 years ago when Vermonters had to band together for their very survival. The miracle is that we have retained enough of the values of that era to sustain us today.

“And it is these values which will enable us to govern well for the next 200 years.

“It is these basics which count, and that is what I have learned in my six years.

“Political strategies are important; the facts, reason and logic, all are critical.

“But the difference between an ordinary government and an extraordinary government is not created this way.

“An excellent government is a humane government, one that makes choices based on truth, justice and compassion.

“To achieve that, I have learned that passion counts. Passionate conviction makes the difference between what happens and what doesn’t.

“I have learned to trust my personal beliefs, because it is our personal beliefs which give the heartbeat to public agendas.

“Intensity of feeling makes all the difference.

“And idealism is what is sustaining.

“That is the only reason to be a political person — to translate belief into action, to create change for the better — whenever, wherever, and however one can.

“It is for this I am most grateful to the people of Vermont, for giving me this position of responsibility for six years, a position which allowed me to transform my values, and to the best of my ability, the values dear to Vermont, into words and deeds.

“I remain optimistic about Vermont’s future.

“We are confident, strong, and resilient.

“There is no doubt that we will continue to be a very special state, even more so as time goes on.

“As I say good-bye, I look forward to the pleasure of living in Vermont as one of its many public-spirited citizens.

“Good-bye and thank you.”

Dissolution

The Governor, having completed the reading of her message, was escorted from the Hall by the Committee appointed by the Chair.

Thereupon, the first Joint Assembly dissolved.