

Inaugural address

of

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Inaugural Address

Mr. President, before I begin the official task assigned to me on this occasion, may I make a very brief personal observation? I would like to join with your many friends and with all those throughout Vermont in extending my personal congratulations to those of you who have been selected to do the great civic duty on which you embark. I want to express my congratulations to you, Lieutenant Governor-Elect Kunin, to you, Mr. Speaker, and to all the members of the Legislature who have come here, I must share once again with you a sense of feeling almost of relief to have you back in Montpelier. I spent so many delightful, educational and truly rewarding years myself in these Halls that I really do look forward to the period when we will be working together again in the months ahead. I am very glad to see you back.

Mr. President, Mr. Speaker, Mr. Chief Justice, Distinguished Members of the General Assembly:

Each of us, every member of the human race, wakes each morning certain to make history and fated to change the course of events. There is no course of action or inaction open to any living soul which leaves the future unchanged. Only the direction of change, the magnitude and worthiness of it, are our options.

And so it is certain that when the representatives of a people gather to consider what they can do together, in the name of all, history will be made. I may be made mightily, in proportion to the needs and opportunities, or it may be made weakly, shrinking and trembling before the task.

You gather here as surrogates for all Vermonters. They have enfranchised you, subject only to the constitutional balance and reservation of their own ultimate powers, to speak and act for them. And so you make history not only for yourself, but for all of us.

Historically, many Vermont legislative bodies have met to face dramatic crisis. None failed to do what the circumstances required. On those occasions the problems were clearly outlined. Little argument was required to identify the central issue or its urgency. Thus crises became the turning points around which enormous bursts of energy were focused to bring needed change.

But most legislatures, fortunately, are not faced with such dramatic calls for action to meet such clearly identifiable dangers. A feeling of urgency and immediacy borne of mortal threat is the unusual, not the common.

In ordinary times we are tempted to apply politically safe, cosmetic changes to even the most persistent and long festering social problems. Legislatures have often behaved, as individuals frequently do, by satisfying short-term needs in ways that have left more basic problems to become ever more serious, ever more damaging.

This may be democracy's most serious challenge, and this may be its most serious defect—a tendency to tolerate inertia in the face of all but the most dramatic crisis, an urge to do the most popular thing when the real duty may be to call forth the same discipline and self-restraint in the prevention of crises as would surely be summoned to face an obvious threat.

A government which panders to the immediate demands of the public for superficial solutions can only continue to erode the public confidence upon which it rests.

The greatest of all legislatures, those most worthy of our children's approbation, may thus not be those who raised armies to fight wars thrust upon them, or who ordered the rebuilding of lands ravaged by floods still receding. The truly worthy may well be those which have the foresight and the courage to take dramatic action bringing us closer to real solutions of basic problems. Herein lies the distinction between the adequate legislature and the truly great—the courage to make signal accomplishments which are demanded by opportunity, rather than by tragedy or necessity.

And these are for us, for Vermont, times of opportunity, not of tragedy. The nation is at peace and our Sons and daughters are at home.

The productivity of our people and the consequent strength of our economy these last two years have yielded such bountiful revenues for the state as to make possible both the largest tax cuts in Vermont's history and the significant expansion of support for education, for the handicapped and for the needy. After decades of incessant growth of the bureaucracy we have, together, reasserted the people's determination to keep government in its place, always servant and never master to the people.

If you choose to do so, you might be excused for treating this biennium as a period of good, but ordinary times. Although there is an ample agenda before you, few are the calls for heroic action or significant new directions which come so clearly that you would not likely be excused by the jury of public opinion if you count this session as one demanding only prudent and honest business as usual.

But the opportunity for you, for Vermont, and for democracy to prove itself, is, I believe, very much greater than that. Beneath the facade of healthy routine lie significant problems for which solutions are long overdue.

Although I recognize that traditionally the Chief Executive uses the opportunity of his inaugural message to list a dozen or more general problem areas, today I have chosen to identify only four issues of particular, of unusual and concern. I believe the opportunity for singular accomplishment on your part exists in each of these—if you will accept the responsibilities and risks of breaking new ground, of meeting serious problems and opportunities head on, with measures of proportion and scale equal to the objectives.

The first of these is in the field of finance.

One year ago, appearing before this body, I said, "Huge basic changes in the fabric of society come rarely, and when they do, they are often difficult to perceive. I believe that right now in America, and in Vermont, a basic change is occurring which in a fundamental way changes the role you and I must play if we are to accept the responsibilities of leadership. That change is that after a long period of years during which the burdens of government have risen to require a larger and larger share of the total wealth of the people, it is no longer possible to increase that share without imposing unfair hardships on the people."

We went on, here in Vermont, to enact the largest tax cuts in history. And five months later the people of California adopted a constitutional referendum so severely and dramatically abridging the levels of taxation in that state as to set off shock waves which still reverberate throughout the nation.

The circumstances under which you will consider matters of appropriation and taxation this biennium are unprecedented. Since we last met, a public demand has risen for a fiscal accountability far broader and more difficult than that of merely balancing the budget.

I believe that we see clearly now that when government feels compelled to fund every program, the total burden of taxes will inevitably make it impossible for our citizens to afford their own personal programs, for their own households and for their own families.

And so, at long last, the people call for restraint. But most national and state legislative bodies have not yet attempted to draft budgets under these new circumstances. It is a dangerous oversimplification to say that it was the thoughtlessness of elected officials alone which brought us to this calamitous level of public expenditures. When existing tax measures provided revenues each year far greater than those of the preceding year, the public applauded the legislators who matched newly identified good works with new public programs, or who vied with one another to announce their support of all public programs in terms of the size of the increases.

Now, the loudest public cries are for budget limitations, and for zero growth. Many, to be sure, call for full retreat and retrenchment by enactment of funding levels which will not provide, in purchasing power, even maintenance of the programs so recently considered essential to the dignity and worthiness of a thoughtful government. I urge you to recognize that instant blind obedience to these calls is no more worthy of this legislative body than it was for your predecessors to enormously expand the scope of government, year after year, to please those who refused then to consider the future consequences of that long and debilitating trend.

What I see Vermonters asking each of us to provide is a government which has reached financial maturity. A government that recognizes that it can not take a larger share of its citizens resources each year, or fail to adequately provide for the real needs of its citizens within those bounds. A government that is capable of

establishing a financial stability which sets limits of reason because it has had the vision and leadership to plan for the future.

When it is possible, the easiest approach to budgeting is to provide all sums asked for. In that, at least at the moment it is done, there is no pain and there is much self-gratification. That is not possible in these times.

The easiest task of those who prepare budgets is in times of financial extreme—of depression or deep recession—when funds are simply and clearly not available as the result of external and uncontrollable forces. In such times denial is the common denominator. Since all claimants go away disappointed there is a sense of equity, parallel to the pain of leaving so much undone. These are not times of depression.

At this moment in history we are asked to provide a leadership which recognizes that Vermont is neither so rich nor so poor that it can avoid the anguish of choice.

We will find some programs worthy, but must risk the criticism of their proponents by admitting we find them less worthy than others. We must agree that some programs would benefit Vermont, yet announce our sincere conviction that others are more timely because they will strengthen our future capacity to finance social accomplishment.

We will still accept new challenges and expand expenditures in some areas, knowing that to do so will offend those whose requests are reduced or denied, as well as those who demand absolute contraction of the levels of expenditure.

To establish your willingness to meet these new budgetary challenges in an era of governmental maturity, I hope you will early adopt a bill which limits 1980 expenditures from the General Fund to an increase of 6 percent, and those of 1981 to a further 6 percent increase, in full knowledge that inflation is currently reducing the purchasing power of each dollar approximately 10 percent per year.

I am asking you to establish for yourself such a spending limit independent of any estimates of revenue. I am asking you to start a new Vermont tradition of setting spending limits based on your judgment of what is necessary and appropriate, rather than on what might be conjectured to be available.

No one knows for sure today, nor will we at the time of the budget message a few weeks from now—nor even a full year from now—precisely what our revenues will be. However, I believe we can agree that in the foreseeable future expenditures held to the level I am recommending will put us on the track of fiscal stability and assure us there will be no need for harsh corrections in this biennium or even the next.

I believe that your treatment of the modest surplus currently in the General Fund is another opportunity to speak boldly in favor of fiscal stability. Such a surplus is a fortunate but unpredictable occurrence.

We must avoid the temptation to appropriate this money for an ongoing state program or to enact new tax cuts.

Although I fully understand the validity of the argument that the surplus should be returned to the taxpayers on a onetime bonus basis, I hope you will not take this action either, until you have satisfied yourself that the monies will not be, in the words of the Vermont Constitution, “Of more service to community.”

I believe there are several onetime opportunities of such potential value to Vermonters as to warrant your considering the allocation of these funds to accomplish those future-strengthening purposes. I will speak in a moment of the largest of these.

Although it is true that a dozen problems have claimed the attention of my predecessors and yours endlessly over these last two centuries, none have been more frequently mentioned with frustration and anxiety in inaugural messages, retirement messages or proposals for legislation, than those dealing with taxation and with the support of the public schools. The two problems are closely linked.

It has been an article of faith in Vermont since the days of the Constitution that a uniform quality of education for all young Vermonters is the foundation of future opportunity, as well as future liberty. And it has been a source of growing rather than receding anguish that there is both disparity in the quality and scope of public education among the towns and great disparity in the burden which education places upon the taxpayers.

I believe we have an opportunity, and a rare one, to initiate action in this session which has a reasonable likelihood of leading us, at long last, to something approaching a solution to the problem.

The unavoidable lesson of history in this matter is that either property must not be used at all to support local education, or that it must be appraised so uniformly throughout the state that all men and women of good will can accept the basis of appraisal in other towns, as well as their own. The time has come for us to build the one indispensable foundation of a program aimed at equalizing educational opportunity and providing tax equity.

We must accept the responsibility of moving promptly and decisively to appraise, fairly and uniformly, all the property in the state. I am advised that this project could be completed in two years. Obviously, this will require considerable expense. It is perhaps the magnitude of the expense as much as any thing which has so long stayed our hand in taking this critical first step towards the solution of this historic problem.

An effective and responsive tax system cannot be achieved without balancing our broad based sales and income taxes with a property tax raised under a uniform system of appraisal, tempered for low-income Vermonters by our property tax relief program.

When I speak to you later this month concerning my recommendations in the area of financial matters, I will recommend to you that you use a sizeable portion of the surplus available June 30, 1978, to appraise all of the property of the state starting first with the nonresidential property.

I hope to be able to make some additional recommendations aimed at decisive action in the direction of public schools which are more equitably financed and thus provide more equal opportunity. A just appraisal of property values is but one of two great omissions which must be corrected in this area. The second deals with the amount of money which must be available in any equalization formula if there is to be any real hope of equalization. It is mathematically obvious that if disparities between property wealth and the number of students to be educated varies as much as tenfold, no fund for equalization which is only a small fraction of the total cost is likely to succeed, even if it be a so-called "perfect" formula.

Therefore, I hope this body will join me in the search for a more equitable method for assuring that the capacity of the entire property tax base of the state be used to achieve equal educational opportunity in harmony with equal tax burdens.

The third area where I believe this General Assembly has a unique opportunity for significant accomplishment is in the consideration of some fundamental principles for the reform of our welfare system.

The will of our people to tax themselves to assist the truly needy, springs from the heart of the social compact. But it has become clear that in the area of welfare, one of our most noble undertakings has evolved into one of our least effective institutions.

I must warn you that in a time of budgetary limits, the need to establish a new philosophy for welfare marks the emergence in Vermont of a truly great social challenge—a challenge which will grow each year and which cannot be met with tiresome debates over old remedies.

It is self-righteous to label as generosity a system which creates as many problems as it solves.

We have taken from people in the name of a good cause but have left them, and ourselves, in doubt as to whether the good cause was accomplished. For example, it is shocking but true that some of those now in receipt of public assistance, often find themselves in better circumstances than many of those whose hardearned tax dollars provide that welfare support.

We must stop blind acquiescence in dependency. Whenever possible, welfare should assist people on the path to independence. To accomplish true welfare reform in Vermont, we must accept the risks of turning away from those policies which for years have been the cornerstone of our approach to funding the needs of the poor.

We must take a second look at what it really means to be compassionate and we must not permit our good intentions to cripple the very individuals we seek to serve. Accordingly, it is my conviction that the following four principles must guide our efforts toward substantive welfare reform.

1. That the goal of welfare be to foster and assist personal independence whenever such an alternative is feasible, and not in such situations to continue relief indefinitely;

2. That state funds which directly support consumption and spending be made available in accordance with real and demonstrable needs, objectively determined, and not merely according to the demands of those receiving the funds or services or those being paid to distribute them;

3. That we accept, as one measure an ultimate goal of fairness, the principle that total welfare support from all sources must not exceed the levels of income a fully taxed working person can expect to achieve. The equity of such a principle clearly rests on the availability of decently compensated employment;

4. That after basic levels of support required to meet the genuine need of our fellow Vermonters have been met, the priority for additional expenditures should be programs which strengthen our people by improving mental health, alleviating drug abuse, relieving handicaps and removing barriers to employment.

The implementation of this philosophy is already under way, and has been for two years. This policy of confidence in the ability of dependent Vermonters to learn to stand on their own has been demonstrated by substantially reduced welfare rolls of unemployed fathers. Additional confirmation of the reasonableness of our direction is provided by the fact that two years ago only 17 percent of those enrolled in our basic family welfare program were employed. One year ago, 20 percent were employed. A month ago 25 percent were employed. With this legislative body's encouragement we believe before the end of this biennium 35 percent can and will be employed. In each area of the Human Services Agency, legislation and budget, you will find specific evidence of this new philosophy at work, and you may at first find some of them difficult to accept. However, unless we can accomplish a transfer and coordination of the WIN program; unless we can substantially increase support for the mentally ill; unless we can decide that an emergency fuel program has outlived the emergency which gave it birth; unless payments to providers of services such as Day Care and Medicaid can be thoughtfully controlled and exposed to reasonable limitations we will fail to achieve our goal.

Over the past two years, this administration has undertaken a major effort to make the basic welfare programs operate at greatly increased levels of achievement. However, this increase of effectiveness of existing programs alone will never solve the underlying weaknesses in our welfare system. What is required of us over the next two years, is a willingness on the part of government to address the real inequities in our income transfer programs.

We have in this state at the present time, a multiplicity of programs designed to fill a large variety of basic needs for various categories of people. Each program has its own eligibility requirements and its own constituency of advocates, some of whom have demonstrated a willingness to defend programs even at the expense of the people they claim, to serve.

We also have thousands of low income people who are eligible for, one, or more often, many of these programs. Few are well served by this shotgun approach and many inequities arise because of it.

I have asked the Secretary of Human Services to accelerate the task of evaluating each of these programs, their interrelationships with each other, their effectiveness and the equity by which each acts as a conduit for taxpayer's money to those in need. Before the term for which I have been today inaugurated is far along, I will be presenting to you my recommendations for substantive changes in our method of transferring income to the people of Vermont who do deserve assistance. In making these proposals, I will be guided by the principles I have spelled out here today because, in times like these, there is no other way to assure that those who are truly, in need will receive our help in adequate measure.

Finally, I call upon you to share a vision to establish now the foundation for an industrious and, prosperous Vermont for coming generations which will measure its success against new and far higher goals.

Vermont was wrested from the wilderness. Its early history speaks of the tasks of assuring survival in a new place uncommonly attractive to settlers, but requiring enormous energies to create from scratch the elements of a civilized place.

Although what we have in 1979 goes far beyond that which might have seemed to be “success” beyond the dreams of our forefathers, it falls short of what our realistic aspirations should be now that we know better the shape of our opportunity. The time has come to raise our sights and to set new standards for ourselves and our society.

I believe it is time for Vermont to reject underemployment, just as unequivocally as it has consistently in the past rejected unemployment. We are unusually situated and have already established for ourselves a national and international reputation as a people of special skills in a special environment. We can build upon that reputation to the immense personal benefit, pride, and security of every Vermonter.

Through the last several national recessions, some industries vital to more permanent trends of progress in this country have continued to prosper and to seek out individuals possessing both the talents and work ethics of the craftsmen of old, and the training and knowledge required by the pacesetting industries of the future. Such employers are seeking out Vermont as a place where people bring an intense Yankee pride in quality and achievement.

The times call for a new partnership embracing every public institution seeking to match people with opportunity and to enhance occupational and professional skills.

A new relationship between our vocational institutions, our colleges and universities, our employment programs, our employment and training efforts for the disadvantaged, and our private industries, will be required to achieve this vision, and I will be asking you to join in the first steps toward the design of a new integration of these many programs now spread so widely throughout government and the private sector. If we succeed, our children and grandchildren will be able to look forward to a life in Vermont, armed with skills which will open to each of them an opportunity of prosperous employment, and which will make Vermont a spectacularly productive place.

The font initiatives I have chosen to present to you today address as yet unresolved problems which we, as the representatives of all Vermonters, must agree to face. If we fail, these problems will rise again and again.., slowly eroding the public’s confidence in both our ability and our will to determine our own future. There are many other more routine issues which together we will resolve in the coming months and which I have not mentioned here not because they are unimportant, but because of my conviction of the over riding need for me to identify the more fundamental opportunities and responsibilities which face us.

I know you will feel the usual pressures to keep this session brief. But I truly believe that Vermonters will judge the session far more by the scope and worthiness of its accomplishments than by its length. There is, perhaps, no reason why a session cannot be both brief and fruitful. However, I believe that what is expected of us in these times of negative public attitudes about government is most of all that we make real progress, that what we do will make it unnecessary to address the selfsame problems two years from now, and that our works will stand the test of time. If our efforts are invested toward putting the right questions and answering them with courage and vision, this will be a Legislature and a session worthy to be remembered.

As our forefathers failed us not, we now begin the deliberations which will decide if we have fully accepted the duty and opportunity to preserve, defend and strengthen this Vermont we all so love.

BENEDICTION

Benediction was pronounced by Rabbi Max B. Wall, Ohavi Zedek Synagogue of Burlington.

Lieutenant Governor Buckley requested that the Committee escort the Governor from the Chamber.

REMARKS BY THE CHAIR

Since it is necessary for-us to wait for the committee to return, I would like to avail myself of the opportunity to say to you all that I thank you for all the kind things you have done for me and I would like to leave you with a thought if I could. Having been your Lieutenant Governor it has been my privilege to visit quite a few other legislative bodies, both domestic and foreign, and I would have to conclude, I do not mean to be irreverent, but some of them could be—as far as being compared to the Vermont House or the Vermont

Senate or a Joint Assembly—could properly be described as a zoo. I would like to tell you very seriously that I think that this is one of the last few places in the world where citizens are represented by a citizen legislature and the will of the people still prevails. I want to tell you that when I go home, I will feel very, very secure knowing that a group of people like this Vermont House and this Vermont Senate are here to look after things.

There are people out there who are well intended, have the best of intentions, and would like to see your government grow and would like to see more and more attention placed at the top. For God's sake, keep it the way it is as long as you can. Thank you and God bless you all.

DISSOLUTION

The Joint Assembly dissolved.

JAMES A. GUEST.
Secretary of State, Clerk.