

Senate Leader Berger Welcomes Colleagues Back To New General Assembly Session

By Administrator
Thursday, 14 January 2021 11:24 -

Senate President Pro Tempore Phil Berger's remarks as prepared for delivery:

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for that warm welcome and for once again providing me with the high honor to serve as President Pro Tempore of the North Carolina Senate.

I'd like to take a moment to recognize a few people with us today:

- Lt. Governor Robinson;
- Justice Barringer;
- Justice Berger;
- Majority Leader Harrington;
- Democratic Leader Blue;
- Distinguished Members of the North Carolina Senate;
- Our Senate Principal Clerk and her staff, our Sergeant at Arms and his staff, the family and guests of those Senate members being seated for their first terms in the Senate, and those countless people viewing on television and over the internet;
- And a special recognition and thanks to the color guard from South Stokes High School and the Heath brothers for singing the National Anthem.

I think I speak for all members in saying that it's unlikely any of us would be here without the love and support of family and friends. They are the foundation on which our success is built. Thank you.

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As we begin this new session, much has changed and in some respects little has changed from where we were two years ago.

We're in the middle of a pandemic the likes of which none of us has experienced.

More than 7,600 North Carolinians have died from COVID, each leaving family and friends mourning a loss.

Social ties are strained, government competencies and coffers are stressed, and countless lives have changed in ways we couldn't have anticipated.

And after a year of waking each morning with the hope that someday we can go back to the way things were, thanks to the fastest successful vaccine development in history, we finally have the slight glimmer of what hopefully is a light at the end of the tunnel.

That is something to celebrate.

And though we haven't had experience with a pandemic like this, we do have experience with a consequence of it – economic recession.

And that experience began a little over 10 years ago. In fact, we spent the first part of the last decade recovering from that recession, and the second part preparing for this one.

Because of steps taken over the past ten years, we have the financial cushion of reserves and unspent revenues to bolster our state's finances.

We've avoided the teacher salary freezes and education cuts the previous recession brought,

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but we know it's not just happenstance that led us to this point.

Since 2011, we reduced the share the state takes in taxes from our citizens. They can keep more of their earnings to pay bills, grow their business, and save for the future.

We cut bureaucratic red tape so the private sector could be the economic engine for job growth.

In turn our population and employment have exploded, with businesses and people moving here in record numbers.

The pro-growth economic development toolbox produced an unprecedented expansion of our tax base. The state's economic pie grew so even at lower tax rates state collections increased to fund the services and efforts of government.

At the same time, we saved for a rainy day. Because of that, reserves existed for hurricane and earthquake recovery, and we still have a substantial rainy day balance as we move forward.

So while the cause of our present circumstance may be different, our policy prescriptions are largely unchanged.

Voters returned Republican majorities to the legislature, bolstering our charge to lead North Carolina out of this recession as we did the last one.

Now, voters also returned Governor Roy Cooper to lead the executive branch, meaning mixed party control of our government continues for the foreseeable future.

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I intend to work with all to find, develop, and expand common ground where it may exist, and I know many of you feel the same way.

Governor Cooper and I have had multiple conversations since the election, and he offered a similar commitment. I take him at his word.

I'm under no illusion that agreement can be reached on every matter that comes before us. This institution is a venue to explore the opportunities that may exist for finding common ground.

People from different areas and different backgrounds come together to explore different paths for our state's future, and each proponent sincerely believes their path is best.

We should not begrudge pressing for a genuinely held policy preference.

Disagreement is healthy and makes for better ultimate outcomes.

We should all welcome discussion and disagreement, and I suggest the people understand what that entails by returning a divided government.

Disputes becomes unhealthy, though, when political posturing derails sound policy. We must all guard against having the politics of an issue override the policy of an issue.

I'm reminded of my predecessor, former Senate Leader Marc Basnight.

He grasped power firmly and won far more political battles than he lost. And I found myself on the other side of him on many issues over the first ten years I served in this body.

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But I also believe that in nearly every encounter, Sen. Basnight intended to advance his firmly held view of what was best for North Carolina.

The fact that he and I had differences on policy did not prevent him from honorably and graciously surrendering power when the people rendered their election verdict.

You, as members of this Senate, represent millions of people who charge you with figuring out how best to see our state progress.

Success is possible only if we approach policy disagreements with the assumption of good faith on all sides.

In that way we can bicker and barter back and forth, and at day's end still see one another as a colleague, not a foe.

Basic decency comes under threat when we assign base motives to one another in times of disagreement.

We become an unhealthy body when we conclude a difference of opinion is born from a darkness in one's heart rather than an honest difference in one's mind.

When that happens, we do not represent our constituents in the high manner they deserve. We cannot demonize one another's motives one day and expect to successfully work collaboratively the next.

We assemble today after a year punctuated by violence, culminating last week in the most symbolic and troubling episode of all: A mob storming the seat of our national government.

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Our Constitution prescribes how to advance change through the three branches of government. Mob violence is not one of them.

In 1838, Lincoln, whose ability to give voice to our core ideals is unparalleled, said of mobs: "By instances of the perpetrators of such acts going unpunished, the lawless in spirit are encouraged to become lawless in practice; and having been used to no restraint, but dread of punishment, they thus become absolutely unrestrained."

Last week's mayhem has been denounced by all corners of American life and it appears that authorities are aggressively enforcing the rule of law. That's good.

There are, however, voices that question whether previous incidents have also been subject to the rule of law.

Unfortunately, some tolerated or excused lawlessness as acceptable, as if one injustice somehow absolves responsibility for theft, property damage, and vandalism.

The late Vermont Royster put the danger succinctly in noting "how thin is that veneer called civilization."

It's critical that we put down the rhetorical weapons that inflame more division and, as Lincoln says, let reverence for the laws "be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice."

Legislators come and go. Majorities expand and fade. But the institution must endure.

All of us, from the most senior to the most junior, have a solemn responsibility to protect our form of government and honor the rule of law.

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So, today, I take to heart Lincoln's instruction that sober reason replace violent passions so each of us can faithfully advance our policy preferences through the civility and respect we show for each other and for the institution in which we are privileged to serve.

Thank you.

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