

Moving Forward

Representative John Gard

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Today is a very humbling experience for me. I want to thank you each for your support, faith and friendship as we prepare for the challenges of the next two years.

I do not plan on making you sit through a lot of boring speeches as your Speaker. However, these days are far too rare to leave without sharing some honest emotion about who we are, where we have been and where we are going.

So I ask you to bear with me for a little while as I talk about us.

First, as I have recited again and again, 58 is a significant number. When I was first elected, the Democrats had 58 seats and we had a measly 41. Today the tables are turned. There are a lot of people that have fought in the trenches to get us where we are today. Good people who never lost their focus like Betty Jo Nelsen, Margaret Farrow, Marc Duff, and yes Tommy Thompson. There are a couple others that we should recognize: David Prosser...Ben Brancel...and Speaker Scott Jensen.

We are forever in your debt.

I think one of the big reasons we have built our majority to 58 is because we haven't forgotten what it was like at 41. We could fight like cats and dogs but our agenda rarely won.

Since we have won the majority in 1994, we passed a world renowned welfare reform law that has changed the culture of dependency all across

America. Tommy Thompson receives a lot of the credit as he should, but it wouldn't have happened without our team. The same can be said about school choice, tax cuts, and property tax reform.

As I said I think it is important to remember from where we have come... and to do that you need to remember those great teammates we have had to win the battles.

Unfortunately, some of our dearest friends who stood with us have had to face the challenges of real life outside of the Capitol. People like former Rep. Lolita Schneiders, who was one of my favorite people I have ever had the honor of serving with. As you know Lita was involved in a serious car accident this past summer. The accident took the precious life of one of her daughters and almost took the life of her and her husband. Thankfully, God's eyes shone on Lita and her husband and they have both made dramatic recoveries. Today I am happy to welcome back Lita who was there for our days of 41 seats to help us celebrate our new majority of 58.

(Schneiders comments)

As I said, please bear with me a little while longer.

Another person who helped lead us out of the wilderness was former Speaker Ben Brancel. As you all know, Ben and his family suffered a serious personal loss this past year when his house was destroyed in a fire. I know he appreciated the warmth and friendship of his colleagues during this difficult time. Ben presided over a truly divided caucus with the numerous tie votes in the Speaker's race but immediately brought us together. He then made us proud with his leadership at DATCP. I spoke with Ben Brancel this morning. He wanted me to convey his great pride and joy with the success our team has accomplished last Tuesday. Unfortunately, the federal

government wasn't completely enthusiastic about him leaving an important meeting today and he couldn't join us in person. However, he is here in spirit today to celebrate 58.

There is one more person that has touched all of our hearts throughout his service and is truly one of the most decent people to ever serve in the Wisconsin Legislature. As many of you know, Tom Ourada recently suffered a serious stroke and was fighting for his life during the last two weeks of the campaign. Once again, God has smiled on a friend and helped Tom through a several day period where he needed every ounce of strength he could muster, to hold on. I am happy to announce today that Tom has made great strides with his health. I visited Tom in the hospital last night and while he has a long difficult road to recovery he is ready to receive visitors from his large group of friends and supporters. He is often tired from all his rehab but as long as people are understanding he would love to see some friendly faces. Since Tom Ourada has always been there for this team I thought it would be nice to hear from Tom. He has agreed to join us to celebrate the largest Republican majority since 1963.

(Ourada comments)

I want to thank every one of our friends who joined us today. We will always stand united and are happy to call you our friends.

Now as we look to the future, there are some new faces that we need to work with. I am confident we can. One of those is Governor-Elect Jim Doyle. Please join me in welcoming Governor-Elect Jim Doyle to our caucus today.

(Doyle comments)

Thank you for your patience. I think it is good to celebrate a little and I hope each of these people help make this day a little more fun.

My key message today, however, is about sharing. We need to work together in the Assembly and Senate with the Governor-Elect to make the changes and reforms that the people who elected us, expect us to make.

Because I believe- if we are going to move ahead- if we are going to be successful during this legislative session- if we are going to truly solve the challenges facing our state today.... We need to share the responsibilities for change.

That sharing needs to occur between the Legislature and the new administration and help the people of Wisconsin understand that we all must share the burden of change- so that can all share in the success of tomorrow.

I would like to discuss a few thoughts on the challenges we share today and a few ideas on how we can share in solving these mutual challenges for the good of the people of Wisconsin.

The Budget

Most of our attention over the next several months will necessarily be focused on passing a balanced budget for the 2003-05 biennium. The task will be daunting. There have been a lot of numbers thrown around about how big the challenge is. Regardless of which number you choose, it will be difficult. I believe we will successfully overcome this challenge if we focus on the first year of the biennium and get it right. Then we focus on the second year...and get it right...and Wisconsin will move ahead.

We will move ahead not just in the sense of working solutions to our current fiscal challenges...but we will get it right in the sense that we can drive real growth in the State.

We cannot afford to forget that growth...economic growth...job growth...opportunity growth is the ultimate key to truly fixing our fiscal challenges. That is the way to ensure we don't band aide over the problems of the past but rather make lasting improvements.

The deficit we face today is actually a manifestation of a larger problem...a problem that the economy is not growing as it should. Today we face economic challenge that per capita income in the Badger State is well below that of our neighbors in Minnesota and Illinois.

And that is the problem because our citizens work longer hours...and hold down more jobs... than anywhere in the country. Our labor participation rate- that is, the percentage of our employable citizens that are in the workforce- is the highest in the country.

Our friends and family are treading water because they are willing to work more overtime...work multiple jobs...and have both parents working working. But this cannot last, and people- the talented and the young- will vote with their feet and go to other places where the incomes are better.

Well, ...we are the party of growth. Governor Thompson understood that if enough people are employed in good paying jobs fulltime, the state's fiscal situation will take care of itself. And now we must work together- Republican and Democrat alike- Legislature and Governor alike- to inspire growth in this state...to give growth a place to take hold and root.

The Challenges we share today...can become the Opportunity Wisconsin shares tomorrow. No one can say that this will be easy. The immediate challenges- such as the deficit will mean everything reasonable should be considered, we all know that. The people of Wisconsin should understand that we all must share in the burden of change- so that we can all share in the success of tomorrow.

And we will be successful if our actions- taken deliberately and taken together as partners in meeting challenges to create opportunity-set the stage for economic growth...growth that will not benefit one county or one area but will be growth that benefits Wisconsin.

This growth won't just focus on a few groups or companies or individuals but include all sectors of our society. This growth will move us forward as a State...taxpayers...municipalities...counties, the university system and schools- everyone that depends on a vibrant economy.

As I began today...I talked about our past success. I have ended with talking about the future. We will only succeed if we work together.

I am an optimist. While I am not much of a betting man I bet on us...I bet that we can do it.

I bet on the people of Wisconsin...I bet that they will understand the need for short term change as we pull together in this great Statehouse to move ahead.

Thank you for your support, patience and for working so hard to help lead Wisconsin to a better tomorrow.