

Joe Hackney
Remarks
January 28, 2009

Thank you, Madame Principal Clerk,
Madame Chief Justice,
Judge Buckner,
Speaker Blue,
Speaker Brubaker,
Majority Leader Holliman,
Minority Leader Stam,
Bill Pound, Executive Director of the National Conference of State Legislatures
Members of the 2009 North Carolina House of Representatives
All our families and friends assembled here,
And all others who have come here today for this occasion or who can hear my voice,
Thank you.

Members of this House:

We face great challenges. This is our time to do something worthy to be remembered.

Nearly one in every 11 working people in this state is out of work, the highest proportion in more than 25 years. And hard times threaten those who are still working. North Carolinians need effective government more than ever, and we, as their representatives, must exercise the full measure of our energy, our judgment, our ingenuity, and our resolve, on their behalf, to accomplish something that endures.

Two years ago, humbled, I asked you, the Members of the House, to join me on a new path to restore distinction to our venerable institution. I asked, as a new Speaker, for your support, your cooperation, and your advice. You gave it willingly and candidly—very willingly, very candidly. Thankfully, there are few shrinking violets in this room. Each of us lends a unique perspective, one born of geography, vocation, schooling, life experience and family.

One academic has noted: “The legislature is not only the first branch of government, it is the branch closest to the people. It is the most representative, with

members firmly rooted in their constituencies.”

"No major policy can be adopted, no major program undertaken without legislative involvement and approval. No taxes can be levied or monies spent without the legislature's go-ahead. Not much can happen in state government unless the legislature is on board."

The people of this state, through our Constitution, have granted their legislative authority to this General Assembly. It is up to us and our colleagues in the Senate, to use that power with humility and restraint. We are not here for ourselves.

In this House of Representatives, the office of Speaker is not a command position, but a position dependent for its success on the good will and cooperative spirit of the House members. Together, last session, we fashioned an approach to our work that allowed us to address the issues of the day in an orderly, thorough and responsible way, while at the same time allowing a refreshing renewal of civil and robust debate.

We worked well together last session. Think about what we did together.

Your work relieved our counties of the sometimes crushing burden of Medicaid costs. You expanded health care options for those with mental illness or high-risk diseases. You turned this state into an international leader in the fight against cancer. You advanced the cause of justice in capital cases. You ensured that an increasing amount of the energy we use will come from renewable sources such as the wind and sun. You formally acknowledged our painful history of slavery and racial discrimination. You respected our state's reputation for fiscal integrity. You expanded our investment in education. You enforced new laws on ethics and campaign finance reform. You did what was right to protect this institution, and to restore the public's confidence in it.

That work came in the face of a crisis of ethics. The challenge was great, and you met it.

Our work today comes as we face a greater challenge—a financial crisis largely not of our making, against the backdrop of a nation at war.

I think we ought to take a moment to thank our military and their families. We are grateful that so many have answered the call to watch over us and protect the way of life that is our privilege, indeed our right. It is their visible commitment that allows for our peaceful transfer of power, for our spirited debate, and our right to disagree. Many of

them have fought and died for our freedom. Let us all stand together now, and pause for a moment to honor their service to our country.

(Be seated.)

The spirit of our fighting men and women, their selflessness and dedication to cause, remind me of the words of Daniel Webster, foremost among legislators in our nation's history: These words are incised in marble on the wall of the chamber of the United States House of Representatives, directly behind the Speaker's chair.

“Let us develop the resources of our land, call forth its powers, build up its institutions, promote all its great interests, and see whether we also, in our day and generation, may not perform something worthy to be remembered.”

In decades to come, those judging us will examine what we choose to do today. Our nation and our state have demonstrated capacity for success as a result of crisis. The Great Depression resulted in the largest public works investments in the history of our nation. World War II led to the creation of the GI Bill, which then encouraged the growth of the middle class. Just down the road in Kannapolis the collapse of a textile giant offers promise of a new research campus that could revitalize a regional economy, change accepted views of nutrition, and transform the way we fight disease.

What can we do now that will be remembered? The task is daunting. When revenues are high and surpluses mount, bold new initiatives can excite the imagination and stick in the memory. But now we will toil on the other side of the tracks where revenues are low and deficits loom. Thomas Friedman reminds us that “a series of great opportunities are disguised as insoluble problems;

Will we create a new green economy with tens of thousands of new jobs?

Will we modernize our transportation system?

Will we move our state away from dependence on foreign oil?

Will we devise more effective ways to keep our students in school until they graduate?

We can do it.

Justice Brandeis first labeled state legislatures as “laboratories of democracy.” It was his belief that state legislatures could courageously adapt to the needs of the day more quickly and completely than any other arm of government. It is true. We are the

vanguard of public policy experimentation.

We can do it.

My confidence in our abilities stems from the solid foundation established by those who came before us. We do not start from scratch as we face these challenges. My confidence stems from my belief in you. Assembled in this chamber are teachers, doctors, lawyers, preachers, artists, business owners, parents and grandparents. Some of you have family roots in this state that reach back hundreds of years and others of you are just settling in. My confidence stems from our collective experience. We are fortunate to have a few who have dedicated years of their lives to the work of this chamber. We have weathered the economic downturns of the past and we have, with careful planning, nurtured deficits into surpluses over time. I believe that this crisis will be no different but for the numbers. In this effort we will have the President and Congress as full partners.

To succeed, we must continue our emphasis on ethics. It must be clear that we are acting in the public interest, not our self-interest. Our work and our finances should be abundantly transparent. Public confidence is critical to our success. I intend to continue the serial referral of bills to committees to ensure that more of our members have better knowledge about the public policy changes we are considering and so that more of you can contribute your ideas. Every member will have time to review conference committee reports before being asked to vote on the House floor, and we will continue to work to keep substantive law changes from appearing in our budget bill.

To succeed, we must maintain our state's fiscal integrity. Economic conditions will require us to make painful choices about spending and cutting. Other states have mortgaged their lotteries, toll roads and their futures for quick-fix cash to address short-term needs. That is not the North Carolina way. As our Constitution requires, we will balance our budget. It is my resolve that we emerge from this economic crisis with our fiscal integrity intact.

To succeed, we must continue to invest in public education. Our children must be better prepared than ever to compete in the global economy. An excellent education is our expectation. We will continue to support innovative ways to prepare our children for the world.

Even now, not all of our children are succeeding. Almost one out of every three students leaves high school before graduation. Two years ago we established the dropout prevention program. Now we have more than 100 small, innovative dropout prevention programs located throughout the state, each addresses the unique circumstances of these young adults who are at risk of giving up on their education at a

time when it is crucial to obtain a high school diploma, a ticket to success.

The diverse economy we enjoy in North Carolina has been built on innovation, creativity, and the powerful engine of higher education. Our community college system is the envy of the nation and our universities are world class. When times are tough our citizens are drawn to them thirsting for knowledge and craving opportunity. We must continue to support them as they train and launch another generation.

To succeed, we must improve public safety; expand public transportation; invest in energy efficiency; and safeguard the rights and investments of our teachers and other state employees.

The Governor will be our partner. For many years she was a member of this General Assembly. She knows our challenge and respects our institution. She understands the separation of powers among the branches of government, and that if we work cooperatively, within our distinct Constitutional authorities, we can solve any problem we face. I am looking forward to working with her.

The public will support us. Our citizens have tired of the contentious political rhetoric that squeezes out the real story about the real needs. They care only that government is working for them, which is determined by whether they have jobs, their families are safe, retirement is affordable, and dignity is attainable. They want us to put aside partisan bickering, join together, and meet this crisis head-on.

So as we begin this 2009 session of the North Carolina House of Representatives, these sentiments I expressed two years ago have never been more true, and have never been more relevant:

There is no place in this State where public servants are more in tune with the citizens of North Carolina, than in this chamber.

There is no place in this State where the issues of government and politics are better or more fully debated, for all to see, than in this chamber.

There is no place in this State where the interests of the less fortunate of our citizens are better represented, than in this chamber.

And, there is no place in this State where those who debate and decide civic issues have more good will, altruism, or intent to serve all for the common good.

Therefore, let us dedicate ourselves, in this session, to civil debate, and let each of us promise to listen with full respect for the different views that are bound to be expressed, all within the principled hope that listening to each other will refine, illuminate and sharpen the strengths and weaknesses of our own positions.

Ladies and gentlemen, I, like you, am deeply moved by the honor and responsibility bestowed on us by the people of this state and by the traditions of this institution. I am ready to begin anew and I know that you stand with me in service to North Carolina.

Thank you, Betsy, Dan, and Will, my family, for your sacrifices; and my brother Jack who does more than his share of the farm duties;

Thank you, citizens of Chatham, Orange, and Moore Counties, for once again electing me to represent you;

Thank you, my colleagues at Epting & Hackney, and especially my law partner of 35 years, Robert Epting, for making it possible for me to serve here;

Thank you, my staff in the Speaker's office, all highly competent professionals dedicated to serving the Members of the House and the people of North Carolina

Thank you, Members of this House for your faith and confidence in me as Speaker of this chamber.

Together, this is our time to accomplish something worthy to be remembered.

Thank you.