

“Why is there an archivist in my soup? Servings from the Document Deli.”

Remarks to New Legislators

Orientation Lunch

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He was a playboy, the idle son of a railroad tycoon. She was a flapper. They met in September 1930 and fell in love. His father threatened to disinherit him if he did not break off the relationship. Undaunted the playboy and flapper married on February 17, 1933. Good to his word, the father disinherited his son.

Though happily in love—they had a son in 1934 and a daughter in 1941—their sacrifice was great. Forced to support his family, the former playboy worked for a boss who verbally and physically abused him. Exhausted, his efforts to relax, or even to bath, were constantly interrupted by neighbors, door to door salesmen, and family members. The children, now in their 60s and 70s, continue to live at home. And, after decades as a stay at home mom, the former flapper recently started her own business.

I am, of course, talking about Blondie and Dagwood Bumstead. For those of you who keep track of such things, Blondie’s maiden name was Boopadoop. Reading short, daily installments about their lives, we lose sight of their larger story, never suspecting the poignancy of their love.

We tend to view government the same way. Caught up in the concerns of the moment, we are left adrift in the present, not understanding the evolving stories beneath current

issues. This restricts our ability to understand, and respond to, the long standing issues of our state.

Let me illustrate by pulling a few “current” issues from the vault.

“That the privilege of electing our rulers...should be the cause of such unprecedented agitation of the public mind, must...be a source of the deepest regret...If the highest officers in our government...are to be vilified—their characters traduced, their motives questioned, and their acts misrepresented; the time cannot be distant when the wise, the prudent...will retire from the contest; and our offices will be filled with the ambitious, the unprincipled, and the designing.” Luckily, as your election so well confirms, that time has not yet arrived. Still, Governor Samuel Craft’s 1828 concerns about negative campaigning retain their currency.

Next:

The study concluded that the “common belief that the poor receive necessary medical care is disproved...” The study’s other findings included:

- 30% of what Vermonters spend on health care is wasted.
- The costs of sickness to families are unevenly distributed. 17% of the rural Vermont families studied accounted for 62% of total health care costs.
- Preventive medicine is sorely neglected because “many families cannot make the necessary expenditures.”

The findings of the 1930 Committee on the Costs of Medical Care sound familiar. So does one of the Committee’s recommendations: adopting a Canadian health care system.

Okay, let's try another issue. "The situation as to prices of gasoline throughout the State has been very unsatisfactory. There have been great differences in prices within the State, and in some places in bordering states much lower prices have ruled than in Vermont. An effort should be made to equalize prices and if possible legislation passed to stop the unfair discrimination." Thus spoke Governor Franklin Billings in 1927.

In his 1927 farewell address Billings also declared that "the nation has an inalienable right to clean waters." He argued that "there should be a uniform antipollution law without discrimination and with penalties and enforcement provisions that are clear and unmistakable....Such an antipollution law should have been passed long ago but it has been defeated by the lobbying of selfish interests. When I recommend a law that forbids the polluting of our streams, I mean a law that will stop all pollution. Such a law would be not only a benefit to our fishing but also a protection to public health and of great benefit to our scenic attractions."

Let's try another current issue. "The question of protection of labor, in its otherwise ruinous competition with the starved and cheapened labor of other countries, continues to be one of undiminished interest. Indeed, the interest has increased, as efforts to give ascendancy to free trade principles have become more active..." What could be more current than concern about the impact of globalization on the Vermont economy? It was also current to Governor William Slade, whose 1845 remarks I just quoted.

Of course pulling quotes from their contemporary contexts is just like reading Blondie in daily installments. The larger story is lost. For example our current understanding of water pollution is more complex than what was known by Governor Billings in 1927. Even as late as the 1970s I have seen documents discussing water pollution in terms of whether you could see it or smell it.

The real issue, at least to me, is the evolution of our responses to the continuing issues of government and governance. How, over time, have we defined and addressed these issues? Can we measure the consequences of past responses? Can such understandings and measurements inform our current public dialogues?

Two key continuing issues are public education and taxation. Both issues have been embedded in the Vermont Constitution since 1777. There is a long and rich history on how each generation addressed these issues.

What are the goals of public education? Different generations of Vermonters came up with different answers. To early Vermonters education was essential to civic virtue. Without an informed citizenry, they argued, demagoguery and self-interest would undermine self-government. By the 1820s, however, the primary goal of education was seen as an informed and productive workforce. And, by the late 19th Century, public education became linked to the pursuit of the higher education necessary to compete in an increasingly complex world.

Changing educational goals did not go unchallenged. In 1921 Governor Percival Clement observed that “the high school curriculum is directed toward such education as will admit students to colleges and other institutions. I question the advisability of this kind of training on the part of the State.” To Clement the primary object of public education was “to prepare a girl or boy, when ready to assume the responsibilities of life, with such knowledge as will ...make them good citizens, valuable to themselves, their families and the communities in which they live.”

As an aside, the 1921 legislature shared Clement’s concern that our education system encouraged Vermont’s young to leave their communities. Act 49 of that year provided free scholarships for students taking teacher training who agreed to teach in Vermont for a set period of time. Finding a 1921 scholarship program designed to keep Vermont’s young in the State is another one of those Blondie moments.

While I am digressing, how to keep Vermonters, particularly young adults, in Vermont is one of the major themes in our history. A majority of towns reached population levels in 1830 that they would not surpass until the 1960s. By the second half of the 19th Century 42% of those born in Vermont resided outside the state. Those who left tended to be younger. Consequently Vermont in the late 19th Century had an older population than most other states. State government responded in a variety of ways, from providing incentives for Swedish farmers to move to Vermont to the 1921 scholarship program I just mentioned. One of the more fascinating, if disturbing, responses was support for eugenics. After decades of noting that Vermont’s best and brightest were becoming business and political leaders in other states, the fear emerged that those who remained were not so able and ambitious. Therefore we began to look at ways of pumping up what

was referred to as that “good old Yankee stock.” That in turn gave birth to the State’s tourism efforts. If we could attract the “right sort” to Vermont as tourists and then encourage them to buy second homes we could begin to reinvigorate the gene pool. The link between tourism and eugenics is, alas, a story for another day.

Okay, where was I? Of yes, as the goals of education changed, so did how we funded our schools. We have always used the property tax to fund education. And yet by the late 19th Century the inequities of the property tax, and thus of educational opportunity, were apparent. In his 1890 farewell address Governor William P. Dillingham noted that “while there are towns in the state in which the average rate of taxation for school purposes amounts to only seventeen cents on the dollar of the grand list, there are others where it amounts to seventy-five cents, and one in which such average rate is one hundred and thirty cents....In the villages where the grand list is large, the taxes are light; while in the hill districts where the grand list is small, they are almost uniformly burdensome.” Dillingham, citing a report by the State superintendent of education, was “convinced that a great wrong has been done to the poorer class of towns and the smaller districts in the failure to provide an adequate system of equalizing taxation for the maintenance of common schools.” He therefore recommended “a state tax to equalize taxation for school purposes among the towns.” In this case the legislature responded by enacting, in 1890, a state levy on town grand lists for the equalization of educational spending. In various forms this statewide property tax remained in effect until a state income tax was enacted in 1931.

Please allow me another digression. Remember how Dillingham singled out the “hill districts” as particularly burdened by property taxes for education? That was because

agriculture remained a key component of Vermont's economy. The hill towns, however, could not support profitable farming. The new law, therefore, advantaged the more mountainous towns. Consequently towns like Killington were receiving towns throughout the 40 years this tax was in place. Ironically, just as the tax was repealed mountain towns began to see their tax bases grow through the emerging winter recreation business.

The inauguration of the state income tax in 1931 was seen as freeing local property taxes for municipal services and local education. It did not take long, however, for the same inequities enumerated by Dillingham in 1890 to re-appear. In subsequent years the problem of taxation was subject to numerous studies, leading to various formulae to equalize educational spending. As one historian of Vermont taxation noted, "In some respects, the history of taxation in Vermont is the history of a state trying to find an alternative to the property tax and looking for a better way to tax income."

Beyond education the search for an equitable tax system was complicated by a couple of historic trends. One was increasing expectations about the scope of government services. In 1933 Governor Stanley Wilson observed that, "We speak of essentials of government. The actual essentials are few. Not long ago the state spent nothing for highways, public health, care of the insane, tubercular persons, public welfare, conservation, agriculture, forestry, industries, and supervision of public service corporations and but little for education and debt service...Probably we have no state endeavors that do not have merit. Some are absolutely essential to the continuance of our functioning as a state. Others are essential according to modern standards. Some are desirable only if we can afford them."

To Wilson the problem was determining which services were essential and balancing that against public expectations.

The other historic reality is that Vermont's potential tax base is limited. In 1963, sixty years after Wilson's observation, Governor Philip Hoff remarked that, "We are a small state. We are limited in numbers of people and yet we are trying to provide essentially the same services that are carried on in states twice and many, many times our size, and it is terribly expensive and we have limited resources...The time has come to sit down and take a good look at ourselves and try to analyze who we are, what we are, what we have in the way of possible revenues we can raise and still make Vermont an attractive place to live..."

Okay, all of this undoubtedly sounds familiar to you. That is, obviously, why I selected these examples from the Archives. It is not my purpose, however, to suggest that you confront a set of unsolvable problems. Rather I hope to convey the idea that you are part of the continuum of Vermont self-government. Each generation has had to find solutions to these continuing issues within the context of its own social expectations and fiscal realities. Now it is your turn.

I also hope to suggest that understanding the evolution of core issues can help inform public dialogues. The Legislative Council, Department of Libraries and State Archives can help you locate this history. For example, on the Archives web site you will find the full, searchable texts of all gubernatorial inaugural and farewell addresses. Since each governor discussed the same topics, the addresses provide a unique longitudinal view of issues. It was from the addresses that I drew most of the quotes I used. Also on our web site, under continuing issues, is information on everything from proposed constitutional

amendments to lengthen terms of office to a history of the veto. We also provide information on managing public records, including a database to our public records and right to know laws.

But I must also confess that the historical context for most issues is difficult to find.

Though state government creates or receives vast amounts of information, we have not traditionally managed it effectively. It is, again, the Blondie syndrome. We only see the current view, the immediate need. We do not consider the potential values of aggregating and preserving information.

A citizen legislature, however, needs ready access to information, particularly information linked to your deliberations. As state archivist my responsibility is to help create that access. I suspect during this biennium we will be working together on a host of issues related to records and information. New technologies are causing us to rethink our public record and right to know laws. These technologies offer opportunities for better access. Those opportunities cannot be realized without better record and information management. It is, from the perspective of archival management, an exciting, if daunting, time.

I look forward, in the coming months, to being of service to you. I urge you, if you have a chance, to stop and visit us at the Archives.

I began with a love story, that of Dagwood and Blondie. Let me end with another; one I know we share. That is our love of public service to our state. Like Dagwood and Blondie discovered, following your true love is not always easy. And yet I know you will find your love, as expressed in your legislative service, to be one of the most rewarding experiences of your life. So good luck and thank you.