

Leading with Civility

Here's a fun fact: almost one American in ten thinks that chocolate milk comes from brown cows. Only four in ten are pretty sure our Civil War was fought over slavery. Three-quarters (just) are confident that the earth revolves around the sun, or that the U.S. got its independence from Great Britain. But 95% of us believe that our country has a civility problem. And when asked where that problem is worst, more Americans name "government" than any other place.

Clearly, Americans save their attention for what *really* matters.

Legislators think that citizens are right on this topic. When asked, legislators say that civility in their chamber is *essential* to producing good policy outcomes, and that bipartisan collaboration (a different thing, but related) improves the effectiveness of legislative sessions. Two-thirds of them feel that civility has decreased while they've been in their legislature. Lots of them (we've all seen the interviews) have left government service because they feel legislative gridlock makes their service a waste of valued time, or so unpleasant they don't want to do it. How lawmakers treat each other, and how they interact, has become a crisis like broken bottles on a vacation beach. Our citizen government, in many cases, has ceased working.

Someone mentioned a beach. As it happens, the *State Legislative Leaders Foundation* has moved into a new campus, here on the long arm of Massachusetts that challenges the sea, and it's big enough to host intimate conferences when a topic warrants special treatment. We decided to christen our new campus with an event on this very issue. Twenty four state legislators gathered here in early August, a Republican and a Democrat from each of twelve states. We wanted pairs that could speak knowledgeably about the state of civility and cooperation in their statehouse at home, and could make a difference when they returned there.

Two other organizations partnered with us to do this. The *National Foundation for Women Legislators* works to support women legislators in a host of ways, and was particularly helpful in recruiting women attendees. The *National Institute for Civil Discourse* runs workshops all over the country, helping state legislators to appreciate civility issues. So far, they've worked with 500 legislators in 15 states. After our conference, that would be about 524 legislators.

The first morning, we talked of leadership. Think of this quote: *Effective political leadership involves listening to both sides. Ensuring that all parties are heard can help alleviate the nastiness coming from the political process. You can still take a stance on the issue while making sure the other side is heard. And: Leaders are most effective when they can enable parties to see and understand the perspective of others in the debate. One more: Effective political leadership grows out of relationship building. It is critically important to build relationships of trust and respect -- both with those you are likely to agree with, and with those you are likely to disagree with. These relationships lay the groundwork for hashing out the necessary compromises and finding solutions that will benefit everyone.*

Who said these things? New legislators, marked by their leaders as promising, and belonging to both parties. All had spent their careers *in the majority*, so their views don't seem to be aspirational. Our conclusion: civility isn't dead, and effective political leadership isn't dead. We just need to find the embers of civility where they are; then fan them, and feed them.

Brent Hill is President Pro Temp of the Idaho Senate. He talked next of visiting with prison inmates once a year, and of one prisoner who said, "good examples are so important. I wish I'd had better examples as I was growing up. And I wish I could be a better example." Brent noted that all of us are held prisoner by things in our pasts; perhaps by things we've said to others, or by sour relationships we've created, hard to reinvent.

Brent spoke of George Washington, who by age 16 had copied, by hand, "110 rules of Civility and Decent Behavior," a set of rules originally designed for use by aristocrats, towards other aristocrats. Some of the rules are profound, some more amusing in the 21st century. Rule #1: "Every action done in company ought to be with some sign of respect, to those that are present." Rule #4: "In the presence of others sing not to yourself with a humming noise, nor drum with your fingers or feet." Rule #21: "Reproach none for the infirmities of nature, nor delight to put them that have in mind thereof." Rule #110: "Labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire called conscience."

Washington modeled extending this behavior to all, not just to fellow aristocrats. It may be no surprise that he is honored still.

Washington had a sense that these things were important. Is their importance hard to see? Our government requires cooperation; cooperation requires talking to each other.

Without cooperation our system may grind to a cold dead halt. Without talking, we certainly can't find the solutions that incorporate the insights of each side. Civility isn't required for all government, but it's required if you want a democracy.

For another day and a half, with 24 legislators talking, so many worthwhile things came up. We'd better romp quickly through a few of them:

◆ *Doing democracy requires knowing each other. When lawmakers and their families lived in their capital, at least during sessions, they got to know each other at their children's events, at parties, and when shopping at the same grocery store. Now that lawmakers spend much less time in the capital, we need other ways for them to rub shoulders. Chamber social events can include both parties; charitable activities bring people together. It's just as important to be friends with the other side, as with people in your own caucus.*

◆ *The tone of campaigns has an outsized impact. Lawmakers take great note of their campaign experience. If they feel it was nasty and unfair, they will ascribe those characteristics to the opposing party, and treat that party accordingly in the legislature. So, the people who set a campaign's tone (often hired campaign consultants from all over the country) have a huge hand in the atmosphere of your legislature.*

In some states, to counteract this outside influence, care is taken to plan bipartisan social or orientation events between the end of elections and the beginning of the session. These give incoming legislators some actual time together, to create positive relationships.

◆ *Legislative leaders are crucial. Their example, in modeling civil and collaborative behavior in their chamber, or opposing it, will have great influence. They are like the control surfaces on an airplane; the direction they go, will help move the entire chamber. If you're a legislative leader, keep this in mind. People notice what you do. If you discipline your own members when they behave badly, and try hard to treat the other side fairly, those things will be noticed.*

◆ *Incivility comes over the transom, through the door, and in the window. Outside forces are constantly introducing incivility to your legislature. Constituents -- both friendly and opposing -- are more polarized in their thinking than formerly, and behave more extremely. Media outlets, on your side or on the other, quickly amplify events and actions, and transmit those views to large*

groups. Lobbyists and special interest groups can have forceful expectations. Your legislature has to actively plant civility, cultivate it, and protect it. Civility is YOUR valuable orchid; don't count on the outside world to tend it.

◆ *It helps to have strict rules in your chamber about civil behavior, and enforce those rules. It also helps to do things with the other side, in session and out of session; related to legislation, and not. There is no end to possible social events, or partly-work events. In the end, one question is: do we want our state to feel like a war zone, or something more like a team?*

As humans, it is easy for us to get annoyed at difficulty, frustrated with others who have different views, angry when situations are hard to improve. We are true to our species when we show that, occasionally. But if we hold affection for self-government, and want our own country to prosper, we need to be our better selves, more of the time than not. That's what democracy asks of us. We don't *have* to take her to the Prom, but if we want to, that's the price. Or a part of it.

People have always known that democracy is difficult, and fragile. Benjamin Franklin was no slouch; he earned his way to being the biggest international celebrity of his day, whose name didn't begin with a royal title. Asked after our Constitutional Convention what our form of government would be he said: *"A Republic. . . IF you can keep it."*

Later, not shy with words, he noted,

Democracy is two wolves and a lamb voting on what to have for lunch. Liberty is a well-armed lamb contesting the vote!

It's been almost 240 years since we won our liberty; nearly as long since we began our government. Ten generations have fought or worked to keep this going, even to strengthen it. Now it is our own age groups that are at the dance.

Do we love this enough to pay the admission? Just a question. But you may believe the other ten generations are watching, noting. None of them can fight for this project, any longer.

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