



The Our American States podcast—produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures—is where you hear compelling conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, and the policies, process and politics that shape them.

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Understanding the Quad Caucus | April 5, 2021 | OAS Episode 126

Ed: Hello and welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast from the National Conference of State Legislatures. This podcast is all about legislatures: the people in them, the policies, process and politics that shape them. I’m your host, Ed Smith.

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That was Washington Representative Sharon Tomiko Santos and Kansas Representative Barbara Ballard, my guests on the podcast. Ballard and Santos are both veteran legislators in their respective states and they also are both longtime members of the Quad Caucus.

The Quad Caucus is a coalition of the four national caucuses of color, the National Asian Pacific American Caucus of State Legislators, the National Black Caucus of State Legislators, the National Caucus of Native American State Legislators, and the National Hispanic Caucus of State Legislators.

Combined, the four groups represent more than 1,400 state lawmakers. The group came together in 2012 with the support of NCSL and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and is focused on promoting equitable outcomes in all communities, focusing on people of color in the areas of health, education, economic security, and justice.

While legislatures have made advances in diversity, they remain disproportionately white and male. We asked Santos and Ballard to join the podcast to discuss the work of the caucus in the effort to create more diverse legislatures.

Representative Ballard and Representative Santos, welcome to the podcast.

RB: I'm delighted to be here, so thank you so much.

RS: And thank you as well. I'm very glad to be here with my friend, Barbara Ballard from Kansas.

Time Marker (TM): 02:45

Ed: Representative Ballard, let me start with you. The Quad Caucus formed in 2012. I wonder if you could describe that first meeting.

RB: Well, it's interesting. We were in New Orleans and whenever you have a group all get together, you're all excited, and we did not know each other. I as the chairperson or President of the National Black Caucus of State Legislators had the opportunity to appoint 10 people, as we each did, to be part of the Quad Caucus.

It was really new because you said Quad Caucus. We didn't have any such thing as that for groups, and so all the four groups were there. So, when we all got together, it's: How do you really get to know each other? We had facilitators and the facilitators made sure, through their exercises, their ice breakers and whatever they thought would be effectively working for us, we started with small groups.

So, we each had to talk about ourselves, but there were specifics about what they wanted to know, so we all would be addressing similar things instead of just going off on whatever you wanted.

When this was going on, I realized this was going to be fascinating because people had such interesting stories that they wanted to tell and I don't know if it was planned this way or not, but you were already excited because this was brand new. No one had done anything like this before. And we started telling these stories.

You began to realize that there were similarities even though they were different stories that were shared. I would just end by saying it was very inviting and it was easier, easy for us to talk about what we wanted because we all felt that we had something in common.

TM: 04:58

Ed: Representative Santos, what was it like for you?

RS: I have to grin when I listen to Representative Ballard talking about that first meeting because, as I sit here now retrospectively considering what was that like, I am overcome by just a very warm feeling. Everything that she was talking about rings so true to me. But trying to respond to your question and putting myself in my shoes when we first arrived, I would have to acknowledge a couple of things.

One is NAPACSL, the National Asian Pacific American Caucus of State Legislators, is the youngest of these caucuses. We were just forming for the first time in 2010, so we were just getting our feet underneath ourselves and it was probably more a reflection of: Are we ready for all of this when we still have so much work to do internally?

I mean, I think it's fair to say there was some skepticism about whether or not we could hold our own, because we were so young, against these well-established caucuses that had so many more members than we. But we also knew that we wanted to be part of the conversation. We could see and understand why intellectually we wanted to be part of the conversation.

I'll say on an individual level as an individual legislator, and hopefully this will bring a smile to Barbara's face as well, this concept was not unusual for me because in Seattle where I live, we have a legendary foursome that we call the Gang of Four, which is a group of... they're all men as it so happens, but one was a leader in the Native American community, one was a leader in the African American community, one was a leader in the Latinx community, and one was a leader in the Asian Pacific Islander community.

And for 40 years, they had been working collectively recognizing that in the City of Seattle, our communities are so small that we would not be able to accomplish anything unless those four leaders worked together. So, you would find that the Chicano and the Black Panther activists would go help our Native American brothers reclaim ceded lands from the Natives that were then being surplussed by the U.S. Military, etc.

So, that was sort of my personal reflection, but I think as a group we were sort of unsure of ourselves. But Barbara mentioned the small groups and I cannot even begin to tell you how powerful those small groups were because there was a deliberate selection of who was going to be in each of the small groups. They made sure that we didn't stay with those whom we knew, but there was a very intentional representation of each of the caucuses in our small groups.

The questions were so, I think, provocative that they became... in my small group, it was very emotional, the sharing, people breaking down in tears and sharing stories that they could not share with their legislative colleagues. I think that type of bonding was instrumental as we moved forward into the next couple of years.

TM: 08:38

Ed: Representative Santos, let me stay with you for just a minute. The notion of racial healing has come up frequently of late in our national conversation, and actually just this week with the horrible events in Atlanta. I know this is something the Quad Caucus has focused on at meetings and I wondered if you could talk about that a little bit.

RS: I think one of the things that really came out of those Quad Caucus meetings, and Representative Ballard I think touched on it, is this idea that we have so much more in common than we have that separates us, that each of our communities had much to learn from one another about the specific oppressions that occurred within the communities and how does that then impact our communities as a whole.

And so, the idea of being able to learn from one another and then find where our... I'm going to use the word hurt, the common hurt, or where the hurt had commonality amongst us, that we could find the relationships that were being formed that were cemented further whereby we could identify with one another's oppressions and persecutions.

One of the things I remember even before the big Black Lives Matters movement of this last summer, and I can't remember... it's bugging me... the young man's name who was shot by police officers. And, of course, it's happening all the time, but the attention being paid to African Americans being shot by police officers for doing nothing but sitting in a car...

I remember we all stood together at one of our meetings with our hands up, taking a photo saying: don't shoot; my hands are up; I'm complying; don't shoot. That's a really powerful way to not just build the intellectual common cause, but to build the emotional common cause.

So to me, that's necessary to be able to advance and, while I personally am not ever going to know what it feels like to walk in my sister Barbara Ballard's shoes as she is an African American woman and I am an Asian Pacific American woman, I can empathize and I can stand arm-in-arm with her as we both then own what's targeting her, because that's going to then the next day, as you pointed out, turn around and target me.

TM: 11:29

Ed: And Representative Ballard, looking back, and I think we're talking about Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, how did those meetings help you think about how we move toward more equity in our society?

RB: Listening to Representative Santos, it got very emotional on my end and I think part of that is because I think we realized that we were in a safe place, that we could talk about our inner feelings. I can think of my small group when some people were a little hesitant as to how much do I want to tell and how much is safe to talk about, because we knew we were going to be meeting for three years. But we didn't know how all of this would unfold.

So, I think we were very careful with what we shared until we felt really comfortable. The healing, I don't think we thought of it; I know I didn't think of it as healing. I thought of telling my story. It dawned on me that maybe I didn't know as much about Asian Pacific Islanders as I should. Maybe I didn't know as much about Latina or Hispanic as I should, or about Native as I should.

People sometimes lump us together: you're all people of color, or you're minorities, and it's like we all understand each other. I think what we understand is the pain and the hurt and the discrimination, but we may not know specifically what that individual, as Representative Santos said, goes through, because we are not that race. But we know what's similar as we go along.

And as we told our stories and we became more comfortable, we realized that this was a learning process, that we don't know everything about each other. We may have empathy, but if you are not knowledgeable, empathy doesn't serve you as well. You have to be knowledgeable

in order to have the empathy in order to feel, and to put yourself in that other person's place and realize you still don't know all of it. But at least you know more than when you started out.

TM: 14:17

Ed: Well, I can tell from both of your responses that this was a deeply personal experience and I wonder, Representative Ballard, how that personal experience then translated into helping you as a leader develop policies that are going to move toward the objectives of the Quad Caucus.

RB: Well, I would say that, I mean, I was the President of the National Black Caucus of State Legislators at that time, but I think what it did in terms of just leadership, not just of the Black Caucus, but in leadership roles as a legislator, in different places, you begin to see a more global picture of what leadership is about and how encompassing or how inclusive are we when we are leaders.

It could be whatever that issue is that you're talking about. How inclusive are you when you are in a leadership role? Leadership is bigger than just I had this and I do this, and I do that. But I have an obligation as a leader to include as many people as possible, to try and understand where other people are coming from, to articulate to other people that they have a similar responsibility too, that it's not just about me; it's about us; it's about we; it's about together and how we handle this situation.

A leadership role became a lot bigger for me, not being in front of it, but how many people can I bring along to see a bigger picture, a global picture, and how can we appreciate each other? Because if you do that and they buy into it, then your leadership role is really easy. You are empowering other people to do things because you have more knowledge about what they are going through than just a leadership role. A leadership role is to bring along other people.

TM: 16:46

Ed: How about you, Representative Santos – did those interactions with other caucus members help you as a leader?

RS: I think the experience was helpful both in terms of broadening my perspective about leadership behavior, as Representative Ballard was talking about, but also deepening my perceptions about who is missing from the table.

I was born and raised on the West Coast. My whole understanding and experience of racial coalition building is built on a West Coast history. I know that both when I went to college on the East Coast, but also I think in my subsequent experiences in meeting people from other parts of the United States, recognizing that my attitudes about racial interaction were not the same across the United States was an important learning, and the way it helped me become, I think, hopefully a more effective leader is to recognize that, first of all, in the Asian Pacific American community, we always acknowledge and say: we are not monolithic; we come from diverse ethnicities, diverse cultures, diverse histories just in our immigration stories of how long we've been in the United States, how we came to the United States.

And so, that teaching was already in my head, but then to realize that I had to expand and deepen that perspective, not just to other racial communities, but even within the Asian Pacific Islander community. I don't know what it's like to grow up being the only Asian in a largely rural, white state, and yet I know in the State of Kansas where my friend is from, we had an Asian Pacific American legislator sometime ago. That is a very different experience than what I've had.

So, the opportunity was not only to get to know the diverse stories of my Asian Pacific American communities, but to understand the diverse stories within the African American and other Black legislators, among the Latinx, among the Native communities.

To me, I hope that as a leader I am more aware that none of our communities are monolithic and that it is important to recognize all the different experiences. And, in fact, it's served me in good stead this year as we've enlarged our members-of-color caucus in the Washington State legislature where our members are coming from multiple different perspectives.

TM: 19:59

Ed: Well, thank you Representative Santos. We're going to take a quick break and then come back with the second half of our discussion.

MUSIC & Gene VO

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TM: 20:48

Ed: I'm back with Representative Santos and Representative Ballard. Representative Santos, let me stay with you for another minute.

One purpose of the Quad Caucus was to build a cross-racial coalition. Why was it a good time to start that in 2012, and how has that need evolved in the last nine years?

RS: One of the reasons I would say that it was very opportune was we had just finished the first term of the first African American President of the United States who himself had very multiracial experiences within his personal life and his personal history, and who I think was a very effective spokesperson for the nation that we have more in common than we have that separates us, that he is the son of an African immigrant and a white mother who also then had a stepsister whose father was Asian – I think in many ways he is a vision for what our society is becoming.

I look at my own immediate family and my grandchildren and great-grandchildren not only look the rainbow, but they are the rainbow. They are white, they are black, they are Latinx, and they are Asian as well as Native Alaskan.

This next generation is going to look back at what we've been doing in this generation and think: What was the big fuss? But we don't know that yet and we have to be able to pave the way because it is happening, and our institutions have to be ready for it. And because we were raised by the previous generation that didn't have that: So, what's the big fuss attitude? We're having to be, I think, mindful of unlearning some of our own inherent biases, some of our own ways of approaching things because that's the way we've always done things. And instead, be able to say: We can be more powerful when we link arms.

And, again, I feel very fortunate that I happened to grow up in an area that already had that example, so it wasn't abstract; it was concrete. So, I knew that that could happen, but I believe we have a practical reason and, again, it's our own families, but I think we have a moral imperative, and that is also looking at what is happening to people of color, to Black and indigenous people, to our Latinx people who are so necessary to our economy and yet who face truly not just discrimination, but persecution here in this country.

This notion of a multiracial coalition to stand up against discrimination and to stand up for equity and fairness I think... again, 2012 was such a pivotal moment to begin doing that with a president who could help symbolize what we were fighting for.

TM: 24:16

Ed: Representative Ballard, what is your perspective?

RB: I think it's extremely important and it's empowering. When we look at 2012, I think Representative Santos was talking about President Obama, but I'd have to go back to 2008 because that was when he was elected, that's when this population wanted to become more involved, and that was our 18- to 24-year-olds, get them more involved in the process. Have them turn out the vote because their vote could make a difference.

So, when I look at all of that, by the time we got to 2012, it wasn't a fluke that President Obama was elected in 2008. He got elected the second time and that made a big difference. And for so many people with 2008, I read articles and saw on TV there were people who thought they would never see this in their lifetime, that they would not see a Black man as President of the United States.

And then I focus back on the comment that was made: Well, okay, the opposition party said we will make him a one-term president, and this was their goal. Whenever you're talking about making somebody a one-term anything, that means you're going to work against them so that they don't get beyond that point. And we found out that in 2012, he was elected again, but before 11:00 o'clock at night we knew.

So, this happened quickly. That meant there were lots of people wanting to do that. And why is this important? Number one, I think when he was first elected, it was like hopeful, things will change, people were excited, people became invested, young people became invested – that's

why they turned out to vote. People felt empowered. People of color felt empowered. Just people in general felt empowered.

And I think that became especially true for African Americans because there was a sense of pride, that we can be what we want to be and that if all people decide they want this to happen, the majority will elect us. And that became extremely hopeful because it had never been seen; it had never happened before.

So, it was really a good time to get the different groups of color together because they were invested. I think we all felt a sense of pride. We all felt a sense of ownership. And that made a big difference because now we were embarking on something new ourselves with the Quad Caucus and we had had the new president elected the second time, the Affordable Care Act had been voted on, and for the first time, people that had never had health insurance now had healthcare. They were feeling hopeful, and we were bringing along what I would call a population of people that had been forgotten, because even though they were working maybe two jobs, they just didn't have enough to have insurance. Now their children could be ensured.

So, people were hopeful, and you saw the difference it made. You elected a Black president, you got a lot of people invested, and now you have health insurance. And I think that might have said to people ah ha, voting does work.

TM: 28:11

Ed: So, was it successful in helping the individual caucuses develop messaging and networks?

RB: Oh, I would say overwhelmingly yes, it really was, because as I said, at the end we get a packet with the pictures and you would check how much interaction you had with this person and what you have done. You would go through and look at it and then you would come across someone and think you know what, I don't think I've talked to this person. On my sheet I would put I need to talk to them the next time we get together.

And then I'd look over here and think well, you know, I read in the paper that they had something similar. I can call them now because I know who they are, or I can send them an email and say: Would you send me that bill that you introduced over there? Because I know this person now; I can do that. It prompted you to make sure you were getting around to all the different people because you may not have been in that group, but this was an opportunity to get, or let's sit next to this person on the bus when we go on the next trip.

And the other part was that all four of us, each one of our organizations, would sponsor a program. So, if we went on a trip to Mexico, Latinx would be doing this one and they got to plan that program. We all got the same amount of money to do our programs. They planned it for us. And that way, it was uniquely what they wanted to present to us. So, we had this learning opportunity.

So, that's why I said it was so successful because each of us had an opportunity to showcase what we wanted to see. And I can remember going out to the soccer field. The man... I'm trying to think of his name, but he was the roommate of Tiger Woods at Stanford University. And I can remember us going out there and sitting in the stands. This was another opportunity. They

showcased how they were bringing along the reservation and the people and the things that they were doing.

So, we got to see actual living and what people were experiencing as well. I don't know any other way we would have learned all of that. It was personal.

TM: 30:41

Ed: Representative Santos, what is the most surprising thing that has emerged for you as a result of this coalition?

RS: We get multiple opportunities to do meetings for professional development, to learn about this policy or that policy, and I think the fact that the Quad Caucus has the lens of focusing the issue of what we now call the lens of equity on policy, which is not something that you often see in these other national opportunities. It is looking at the policy without that lens.

And I guess what I am most surprised about is that the application of the lens of equity, which I've always felt is important, but I've also always owned it as my parochial or personal issue to champion, to realize no, actually, there is a national value. There is a value to having that lens of equity more commonly adopted and, perhaps more importantly, where there are fewer people of color. So, it sets up almost this enigmatic situation of: How do you ensure a lens of equity is applied when there aren't those who are experiencing the inequities to help guide the conversation there? So, that's probably the most surprising personal learning.

The other thing that I think I'm a little sheepish to admit is I didn't really expect to develop such deep personal relationships that have been sustaining, and I mean that in two ways. Sustaining in that it's still something where Representative Ballard could call me out of the blue and say: I need you; I need you. And I wouldn't hesitate to do the same thing.

But I think it's also sustaining to me personally, to know that those deep relationships exist now all over the United States on both sides. And I appreciate that.

TM: 33:12

Ed: Now, when I look at state legislatures, I see a lot of people who look like me: older white guys. An objective of the Quad Caucus is to increase diversity in legislatures and I'm wondering how in, say, the next decade, that picture might look a little different and more like members of your coalition.

RS: Well, I not only think that it's possible. It is here. In my state, which is a very white state... close to 70% of the state population is white, but in the last election, the House of Representatives and the Senate delivered so many people of color that we actually constitute in the House a third of the entire chamber, which is an effective legislative block.

So, I think it's not about: Do I think it's going to happen in the future? I think it's already here and I think it's going to grow. If you will, I think we are a trailing datapoint in the legislature for what's actually happening in society.

TM: 34:23

Ed: Representative Ballard, what's your vision of the next ten years in terms of the demographics of legislatures?

RB: I think there is great promise, great promise in terms of so many things. But I think we go back to 2012 where people felt invested, where they felt a lot of pride, where they looked out there and said you know, when we all got together and we all voted, and we got other people to go and vote and everything else, look what we did. Look what we accomplished. We elected the first African American President.

And I think people would look now and say oooohhh, we elected the first woman Vice President, who happens to be an African American as well as she has Asian roots. So, we looked at that. All of that happened because we voted, we worked together, and we got this done.

And when you talk about the diversity and what happens in the chambers, you know what's interesting? This year we elected seven new women. That's a lot in one year. Seven new women, our second Native. The session before, our first ever two LGBTQ and an Asian. And we looked at all of that when it happened and said: Oh, my goodness, it was easier for us to recruit candidates the last two sessions than it has been in a while.

And I think part of it is because some of our younger people were inspired and they wanted to run. It has always been difficult to get women to run because they don't like the political arena; they don't like the conflict; they don't like politics. But, for some reason, seven women in one session? It made a big difference.

So, diversity is changing in so many ways, not just because of the Quad Caucus, but because of the circumstances where people realize that my vote does count. They saw proof of it. I didn't have to keep knocking on them to say yes. They saw proof and they had a candidate that came who said he would consider a woman, and he did. And they worked together.

And then, what do you see? You see Georgia change. Not only did the state change, but they elected two brand-new Democratic senators. It all started with 2008, go to '12, get more people excited about what happens, and they will want to run, because they see people like me and if they can do it, maybe if I work hard and I'm lucky and get enough people to vote for me, I can do that too.

Ed: Well, thank you both for what I think has been a fascinating discussion and for sharing your time and perspective. Take care.

MUSIC

Ed: And that concludes this edition of our podcast. We encourage you to review and rate our episodes on iTunes, Google Play or Spotify. You may also go to Google Play, iTunes or Spotify to have these episodes downloaded directly to your mobile device when a new episode is ready. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, this is Ed Smith. Thanks for listening and being part of "Our American States."