



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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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 am your host, Ed Smith.

CS: It’s a grind being a legislator and having to deal with all of the things that are pulling and tugging at you. But my message would be, it really is the most and the greatest place in America for public service which let’s be honest, that means it is the greatest place in the world.

Ed: That was Florida House Speaker Chris Sprowls, my guest on today’s podcast. As a legislative leader in one of the nation’s largest states, Sprowls is a busy guy. When we heard he was also hosting a podcast, he seemed like a perfect guest for this show. Sprowls’ podcast “Read, White & Blue,” wrapped up its first eight-episode season on April 12 and featured authors ranging from Todd Rose who wrote *The End of Average* to *Devil on the Grove* Author Gilbert King. Sprowls talked about why he decided to start the podcast, the opportunity to talk about issues in depth and his favorite book from childhood. He also shares the biggest challenge to leaders in Florida. Here is our discussion:

Mr. Speaker, welcome to the podcast.

CS: Thanks Ed. It is great to be with you.

Ed: I’ve had the opportunity to interview some legislative leaders on this podcast and from other work. And boy, those are busy jobs. And being Speaker is especially busy. So, let me ask you first, why would you take on this new podcast on top of everything else you have to do?

CS: Yeah, my wife asked me that same question. You know, I think it really had to do with I was talking to my staff a bunch and I read books. I’m an avid reader. I try to read books that are at least connected or loosely connected to the things we can work on in legislature. And I’m always going in and talking to them about it and I think to a certain extent they probably get a little bored and frustrated with me. And said you know why don’t you do a podcast and actually talk to the people who wrote these books and really sort of dive deep. But also, make the connections for

people. Right. You know you read these things. You work on a piece of policy. You know you work on something that becomes law because you have these views which are based on something you read. And people never really know that back story of how that came about or why it matters or why it is important. Or they actually thought about it before a law you know goes into effect and signed. So, this was a chance to do that. To really showcase the great authors that I enjoy reading. But also, who at least in some way contributed to you know our mission in the Florida House and what we've done and what we've worked on, how we've approached a problem? And really be able to tell the legislators, the staff, the public, people who are interested in it, you know how that took place and why it matters for them, their families and you know our future as a State.

Ed: Well, it's always good to hear that staff are offering you sound advice. I'm wondering what kind of books you are focusing on. Is it all non-fiction, public policy stuff or are you going further afield?

CS: Yeah, I don't really think there's much of a limit. I think when I first approached it you know it was here is ah, we had Todd Rose on the podcast who wrote several books: "The End of Average," "Darkhorse," which are really connected to workforce to education policy as it relates to expanding the workforce. We did one of the largest reworks of a workforce policy anywhere in the country. Todd's work contributed to that in a significant way. So, there's that direct connection. And then there's you know looser connections right. And so, you have Amanda Ripley who has written a lot about education policy, the smartest kids in the world and how they got that way. But she wrote this book recently called "High Conflict," which we had her on the podcast, and you know as politicians or staffers or people who work through the political process, you know "High Conflict" is like a lunchtime for us. And so, it is something we are very used to, and she really approaches it from a cool more interesting way. So, I thought that had a nexus to certainly the work that we are doing. But I'm really open to anything, and I think that you know reality is when you work in the political environment, it is about society and there really isn't a limit to sort of the connections that you can make through the work of these great authors. So, I've heard folks like Mark Patterson you know on the podcast who is one of my favorite authors; he is a Christian author. He is a pastor of National Community Church up in Washington, D.C. He wrote a book called "Win the Day" about you know how you approach life. And it was actually one of our sort of mottos internally in the Speaker's office. It was "Win the Day" based on that sort of mantra and that work about you know you approach politics or lawmaking, and you try to win the year. It's like impossible. But you might be able to win the day if you try. That is what his work was about. So, I don't feel like I think there is a limit. I enjoy history. I enjoy public policy. I think there are even some ways to maybe you know meld in some non-fiction in there.

Ed: I know in an earlier conversation you mentioned "2034." I read that when it first came out. It's a pretty sobering book especially in the current situation. Is that an example of a novel that you might bring to the podcast for discussion?

CS: Oh, I think absolutely. And what I meant to say before was you know have some fiction. And this is like a great example of "2034," which is really you know setting up a fictional story of what a you know a global war could look like between the United States and China and the other players who might get involved. And I'll tell you, I was reading that book during session. It might not have been my best session pick. And you know I, reading it before I go to bed and like halfway

through, I go to sleep. I wake up the next morning do some things and of course you know check the news, check Twitter and they are talking about you know war games in the South China Sea and Taiwan and I'm thinking to myself oh my God. You know I've just ready this book and I think it is a really well-done book about what a global conflict can be. Clearly written a couple of guys in addition to being good storytellers are also trying to illustrate to people the geopolitical sensitivity of what's happening in China between the United States and the rest of the world and how you know sensitive that can be. So, I think books like that are really helpful. I just did a podcast with Michael Knowles, and we were talking about how you know people have really done a direct assault on the English language and speech and changing what words mean. And we started talking about 1984 and we started talking about "Brave New World" by Huxley and how that relates to this conversation. Obviously, both of those were works of fiction. But they are works of fiction with sort of a societal and political purpose in mind. So, I think that those can be wildly instructive. So, there is that old saying that life imitates art and I think that holds true today.

*(TM): 06:34*

Ed: I've read a great deal of Orwell and I'd agree that some of his books and essays resonate with what we are experiencing today, almost eerily so. Now I'm going to assume you were a big reader as a kid and I wonder if there is any one book that stands out for you from your childhood or teen years?

CS: I think as a kid, I think initially I really struggled to get interested in reading which is probably why I've been so passionate about reading illiteracy because I think as a child, I wish I had caught on sooner. And I think if we can catch it on sooner with kids, it's going to completely change the way they view the world. But you know as a kid, I think you know C.S. Lewis "The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe" is probably you know the one that I enjoyed the most or remember as your first, as my kids would say, your first chapter book. You know as your first chapter book that really stuck with you because there was so much going on. You have this new world. When you are a kid, we start at this new world reading initiative which is the largest book delivery program and effort to get kids to read at grade level at any state in the country. We called it new worlds because I said it in a speech. But when we wrote that speech, I really had something like "The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe" in mind. This idea that you are going to walk through a closet, a wardrobe and you are going to enter this entire world and there are villains and there are goblins and there's a fight for you know justice and truth. And there is this adventure, and you get to take part as a child and be part of the adventure. I think that's what we had in mind. So, when I was a little kid, you know that's the book that probably started that for me.

Ed: Well, that's a great description of what makes reading so engaging the ability to walk into another world. I want to ask you about the audience. Are you hoping to reach mainly your colleagues or Floridians generally or maybe other lawmakers around the country?

CS: I think yes to all. I mean I think that you know certainly the people that are probably most likely to listen are going to be you know our colleagues, the folks that who work in and out of the legislative process particularly because we are trying to connect the dots for folks between what's out there in the literary world. You know what people are talking about, writing about versus what we've done in public policy. But you know I think if you are a book lover, if you like

history, if you like thinking about problems in sort of a you know non-traditional way that might get to a more nuance and effective solution. I think if you are somebody who enjoys Ted Talks or current events. I think really there is something in it for everybody. And we've tried to interview authors; not or just ones that I've enjoyed or have relevance to us. But also, kind of a different sort of a collective group where regardless of what your sort of main interest is. You know if you are a true crime person you know there is going to be somebody you know for you. I just interviewed Gilbert King who wrote he won the Pulitzer Prize for *Devil in the Grove* which will come out next week. You know if you're somebody who really appreciates that environment, environmental policy, environmental history, you know Jack Davis who won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Gulf* you know as part of the podcast. So, we try to do a little bit of everything for everybody.

Ed: Well, it sounds like you've had some pretty far-reaching discussions. I'm curious about how it ties in with being speaker. Is it about being able to explain your take on a topic in a nuance way and at the pace you want and not trying to get that across through a reporter or some other means?

CS: Absolutely right. You know it's you know we live in a political environment now where you know you've got to convey your thoughts in 120 characters. And that's hard to do. And I think what ends up getting lost in that process is the nuance. And let's be honest, present company excluded like people who are involved in this process, but you know the kind of mainstream media on things like that, they are not really interested in the nuance. Like you really got to hang. There is a difference between reading a tweet and reading an article in "The Atlantic." You know one is going to take you awhile. One is super quick. And people really don't have the patience to kind of hang and see it all. But I think it's important when you are talking about public policy that you can show and demonstrate the thought that went into it. How you've connected maybe an idea to the practical.

I mean one thing I think is really difficult you know you read books about public policy. And usually, they highlight the problem really well. You know it is well documented or researched. And then you get this sort of a solution and it's kind of like end. I don't know. Here are some ideas to get you started. They are not. You know. We don't really know though. I do think that there is this huge gap between the idea, the problem and how do you solve it and how do you come up with a solution. So, I think that one of the lead parts for me and what we are trying to illustrate through the podcast is you can take from the outside world from people who engage in the research doing the thoughtful work and then get our people who are experts. You know our members who are experts. Our staff members who are experts. The experts that we bring in from all parts of Florida and then work on the solution to the problems that have been so well articulated. And that's been really one of the most fun and rewarding parts for me.

(TM): 11:22

Ed: Mr. Speaker thank you. We are going to take a quick break and then come back with the rest of our discussion.

(Music/Advertisement)

While I have you, I'd like to ask you about Florida. What would you put at the top of your list for your biggest challenges in Florida in 2022?

CS: Our biggest challenge is success and that sounds like a super biased comment coming from the guy you know who leads the legislative chamber in the state but let me give some context to it. The success of Florida means what? It means that you are leading the nation in domestic migration. It means that people when they decide that they are going to leave their home state and they are going to go somewhere else, a big, sizeable portion of them are coming here to the state of Florida and that success creates challenges. It creates challenges in transportation. It creates challenges in you know meeting the needs in education. During my last year as Speaker, you know we passed the largest expansion of school choice in the history of the United States of America. That's obviously something we feel very strongly about and passionately about. But it's also a response to the fact that we realize all these folks are coming here and we need to provide as many educational options and empowerment for families as possible. You know the investments we make in public transportation or in healthcare. But the fact that we realize that because people are now moving their businesses here. You know when I was growing up in Florida in the early 90's, people were. You know Florida was sort of like the carrot at the end of the life well lived. You know it's like hey if you did well and you raised your kids and you saved for retirement, you get to come and you get to move to the villages in Florida and play pickleball and play golf and live the dream.

That's not the case anymore. I mean we still have that. The villages are doing very well. They are expanding. But you know Florida is well beyond that now. You know you have people that are running major hedge funds, major businesses, major manufacturing entities who are coming to this state to raise their families and to build their business and build prosperity which means that we've had to now look at how are we going to expand our workforce to meet the rapidly expanding nature of our business community which is why as I mentioned with that podcast with Todd Rose. You know we passed the Reach Act which is the largest. We really blew up the workforce system and completely started over because it was broken. So those are our challenges. They are the result of success, but the challenges are real. And I really believe over the last year and a half, we've stepped up in a major way to meet them.

Ed: When I was growing up in New England, and I am considerably older than you are, the perception of Florida was just as you described it. But it's a very different place now. But let me get back to books. What was your favorite book of the last year or so even if it's not one that made it onto your podcast?

CS: Oh, that's a good one. That's like you know pick in between like your favorite children. You know I'll give you one that I feel like I probably wouldn't maybe have on the podcast, but it is really a fascinating story, a true story called "The Greatest Beer Run Ever." And you know if you can picture this scene, it's like a bunch of guys hanging out at their favorite pub in New York City during Vietnam talking about their buddies who they had up on the wall who were in Vietnam fighting Vietnam. The bar keeps, the owner of the bar is talking about we need to thank our boys. You know we need to tell them how much we appreciate them. And everybody is holding up their beer and they are like yeah; we've got to do that. And he says well one of us should just go over there and thank them in person. So, this one guy who is one of the guys who he's also a merchant seaman, a merchant marine at the time. He goes well I'll go. So, they like get a collection of like their favorite beers from New York City and this guy puts it into his backpack, gets on a merchant ship headed for you know southeast Asia to Vietnam. Arrives

wearing his like you know merchant clothes and then systematically goes up to people. You know like a guy who is going to fly a helicopter and goes like hey are you by any chance to this region. I've got a guy there I want to talk to. And this guy is getting like you know hitchhiking through Vietnam you know courtesy of the United States military. It turns out they all think he is CIA which is why he is dressed like that. And he is out there finding his buddies and delivering them beer like in a foxhole saying hey man I just wanted to come and see you. The boys said thanks. Here's a beer and I just think it's such a cool story. It's a true story, but you want to talk about you know acts of friendship and acts of loyalty. You know imagine flying across the – you know sailing across the country to a war-torn area to go find your buddies just to say thanks. I think that's pretty cool.

Ed: Okay. I'm going to check that out. It sounds like it's a good read. As you know, we have an audience of legislators and legislative staffers mainly. Any parting thoughts to share with them from your perch as Speaker in one of the largest states?

CS: It's a great question. Here is what I've said, and I've said this often is I'm always using the context of Florida, but I think it holds true to a lot of different states. I believe that serving in the state legislature, rather you are a staff member who is in the reach of that job because you wanted to make a difference; you wanted it to matter when it comes to running your state. Or you are a legislator. It is one of the last great places in American for public service. And I say that because you know look at Washington, DC right. It's sort of like the opposite of being in the state legislature. You really can't get anything done. The place is completely broken and dysfunctional. And yet when you come home and you are in the grocery store, everybody knows who you are. But being in the legislature is like the opposite. You can go up to your legislature. You can accomplish an amazing amount. You can transform your state in a really short period of time. And then you go home, and you are buying milk, and nobody has got a clue who you are for the most part. That's a cool thing to be able to effectuate change on a mass scale without really altering your life in a really significant way. So, I would just say I know it's hard. It's a grind being in the legislature and having to deal with all the things that are pulling and tugging at you. But my message would be it really is the most and the greatest place in America for public service. So, let's be honest that means it is the greatest place in the world. Try to remind yourself of that when you go to work and go to win the day; don't try to win the year. Just win the session and if you do that session over session, you are going to transform your state and create opportunities for your people.

Ed: Well, that's a wonderful note to go out on especially for NCSL. Thanks so much for taking the time talk books. Take care.

CS: You too. Thanks Ed. I appreciate it.

Ed: And that concludes this episode of our podcast. We encourage you to review and rate NCSL podcasts on Apple podcasts, Google Play, Pocket Casts, Stitcher or Spotify. We also encourage you to check out our other podcasts: "Legislatures: The Inside Storey" and the special series "Building Democracy." Thanks for listening.

*(TM): 18:53*

