



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, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy.

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What I Wish I Knew: Veteran Legislators Reflect (Part 1) | OAS Episode 55

Welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast of meaningful conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, I’m your host, Gene Rose.

Series of quotes:

“I care about what this is going to look like when I’m not here anymore. Something had to be different and better because I was there.”

“First of all, you can’t be a one-trick pony or a one-note symphony.”

“I think the most important thing is remembering why you’re there.”

“If you can make a difference, leave the place a better place than you found it, and your constituents and your district better than you found it, you’ve done your job.”

Gene: If you could write a letter to your younger self before you started your career, what would you say? That’s the premise of this special edition of “Our American States.” This is the start of a two-part series designed for new state legislators called “What I Wish I Knew.”

More than 20 percent of the nation’s 7,383 state legislators are new to the job. For these two episodes, we talk with two current and two former state legislators, all who have had leadership positions, and ask them to give these newly elected legislators advice or what they wish they knew when they walked into that legislative chamber for the first time.

Our guests are, in alphabetical order: Utah Senator and former NCSL President Curt Bramble; Illinois State Senator and current NCSL President Toi Hutchinson; former Indiana Senate Pro Tem David Long; and former NCSL President and New Hampshire House Speaker Terie Norelli.

In this first section we asked our guests to tell us what surprised them when they first became a member of their legislatures. Here is Illinois Senator Toi Hutchinson.

Toi: There’s a very big disconnect between what people think legislators do and what legislators actually do. So I think I was probably more surprised by all of the stuff that’s not sexy, the things

that don't make the papers, the meetings you go to that nobody knows, the times when you show up to talk to a group of people and there are only five people there and you've still got to give the best speech of your life because those five people care that you stayed ... all the weekends and evenings and holidays that you give to this, and that you have to give to it with a smile on your face and open arms even when people are telling you: You don't do anything, you don't know anything, you don't care about anything, and I don't believe anything you say.

And you still get up every day and go to work. So I think the thing that was the most surprising was how very much time you have to dedicate to this and how very little people see of it.

Gene: Here's former Indiana Senate Pro Tem David Long.

David: I think probably it's a similar experience for everyone, which is the sheer volume of information and issues with which you're confronted. I was a city councilman for eight years before I became a state senator, so I was used to working on local government issues. But you're confronted with so much more, just the fiscal issues alone, dealing with a budget and trying to understand all the permutations there: education, corrections, transportation, environment, etc., and so forth.

It's a significant volume of information. It's a steep learning curve. For the first year a lot of people walk around in a bit of a daze, at least for the first month or so. Though I was experienced in politics at the local level, I was surprised by the volume of information.

And I think everyone needs to understand that that's a common experience for new legislators. Don't feel like you made a mistake coming down here because I just don't know that much. Most people don't when they get there. The key is to work hard and learn your trade and it will come to you; it will become more familiar in time. But it's a whole lot out of that fire hose at first and everyone goes through that.

Gene: Here's former New Hampshire House Speaker Terie Norelli.

Terie: I think one of the most important things for freshmen, and I don't want anybody to hear this as don't raise your voice, but it's often important to figure out on the issues you care about most, who are the voices that are already out there on this issue, both inside and outside of the legislature. And what have they been saying, both people in favor of and people against the issue? What have they been saying so I can understand the landscape? And what bills may have come in in the past and either been passed or not been passed?

Maybe, as those of us with experience know, there's a bill that's come in every single session for the last 10 sessions. Wouldn't it be helpful to know what that is and to know why it didn't pass and to see if there's a different way that you can approach it?

So I think really just trying to understand the landscape, reach out to people who are already working on this issue—again, those relationships are so important.

Gene: And here is Utah Senator Curt Bramble.

Curt: In my case, I thought that I needed to come out of the starting gates being very aggressive and establish some boundaries, not recognizing the process. You can be overbearing; you can be

overly aggressive; you can be perceived as a bulldog or a bully or whatever. I thought politics was all rough-and-tumble and so I came out swinging basically.

And what I very quickly learned is building consensus is not steamrolling. It's not based on political muscle. But it's based on the power of ideas. And when you learn that it's the power of ideas and you need to build consensus, it takes a constitutional majority, and you can't do it alone. You can't suspend the rules and send your bill directly to the governor. It has to pass through the other chamber. You can't just pass it out of your committee. It has to pass on the floor.

When you learn that, then you need to recognize and respect the differences of opinion and navigate through that without that aggressive, no-holds-barred approach.

Gene: Learning the rules and how the process works is critically important, according to Norelli and Long.

Terie: One thing that I was fortunate to know or to be told by someone when I first came into the legislature, but I think a lot of people aren't, is how important it is to understand the rules and to understand the process. And the rules and the process are there to ensure, we hope, that everybody is treated fairly, members of the majority, members of the minority, long-term members, freshmen members, and if you understand the process and you understand the rules, then you won't be irritated when all of a sudden you think something isn't happening the way it should because you'll know that it is, or you'll understand that you can go to somebody with the rules and say: Wait a minute, the rules say this. I should have this opportunity.

So I did have a colleague, actually a member of the other party that I worked with on an issue in which we shared a passion, who told me very early: You have to know the rules. And what I certainly found out was how right she was. And I became known as someone who understood what the rules were and so people often came to me to say: You know, is this the way it's supposed to be? Well, yes it is. OK, then they feel better. Or no, it's not, and this is what you do about it. And then they can take action.

So I do think it's really important for people to understand both the rules and the process.

David: I had an annexation law in Indiana; it was kind of one-sided on the side of government and I had had some of those issues up in my district, very contentious. So I attacked that law and in my third year, I probably had the biggest change in annexation law in the history of our state, and it was not without a real fight.

That was an accomplishment that I was very proud of. I learned how to maneuver that bill a little bit over a couple years of losses. It took me three years to get there. And I found some allies along the way, which is very important. But that was a significant accomplishment, something people say you'll never get done. And I've found over the years that "never" is not a word you should trust. I've seen an awful lot of change in my state with issues that people said would never change, you'll never get that done, or if you do, you'll get voted out of office. And the reality is it's not true. You can tackle tough issues, but you have to work at it sometimes to get it accomplished.

Gene: Making the best of committee assignments is essential, say Bramble and Norelli.

Curt: Committee assignments generally are handed down by the powers on high and no matter what committee assignment you're given, pursue it with a passion, learn all you can, kind of to quote a commercial, "be the best you can be." Take whatever you're given and magnify it. In doing that, you'll also do your own agenda wonders.

Terie: So when I was a freshman, I was put on a committee about which I knew zero. Truly, I knew nothing about this topic. It was science, technology and energy, and they told me they put me there because I used to be a math teacher.

And so I think learning, again, kind of building relationships on the committee, both with members of your own party and across the aisle, figuring out who are the people that have various expertise, both on the committee and maybe those who frequent the committee and interface with the committee, whether they're agency people, lobbyists, activists—get to know them, get to learn from them, and begin to build a reputation as someone who really knows your committee work and understands it.

And, again, I'll say it one more time, those relationships are so important.

Gene: And knowing when and how to speak on the chamber floor is another acquired skill.

Terie: Boy, I really do wish I had known about that when I was a freshman because I was talked into speaking on the House floor about an issue that before the legislature I was very versed in. But it was kind of at the last minute and I really don't think I was as prepared as I should have been, certainly not as prepared as I could have been.

And so I think that you look for an issue where you have something to bring to this conversation. I would have, again, a conversation with other people who are speaking on the same side that you are to make sure that you're not duplicating what other people are saying, that you're bringing a fresh voice, that you are saying what you need to say in as few words as you need to say it— in other words, don't wear out your welcome.

Probably the biggest mistake people make on the House floor in my opinion is that they overstay their welcome.

Curt: And whether you're a freshman legislator or a seasoned legislator, you'll find in every chamber there are one or two or a handful of legislators that tend to dominate the speaking time. Generally, if you're one of those, you get tuned out. So speak when you have something important to add. You have two ears one mouth—use them at least in that proportion.

But I think if you reserve your comments to when you have something to offer that's germane, critical and timely, and exercise discretion the rest of the time, you'll do well.

Gene: Long says it's very important to realize you'll be working with some very talented colleagues.

David: Time is really what gets you to the next stage of your political career in the state legislature: time and effort and hard work, learning your trade, reading your bills—that's very important.

There are not many slackers in the legislature at that point. Everyone is pretty sharp, pretty experienced, they have their own life experiences they bring there, very different people from all walks of the state, but they're all smart.

There were three of us that ran a nine-person city council before. That wasn't the case in the state legislature. Everyone can carry the water down there.

Gene: Seeking out relationships with your new colleagues, even those on the other side of the political aisle, is needed to have success in the legislature.

Toi: It is hard to manage all the people that you meet. At any given point in time it can be the advocates on an issue, it could be your other colleagues, people in the other chamber. It could be just regular constituents. You just know that this is a job that you do on behalf of a whole bunch of people that you may never meet, you may never see again, and on behalf of people who don't make the newspapers, and nobody writes articles about them and they don't get invited to do podcasts.

So you have to be humble enough to get: I'm one person swimming in this sea, and so I have to try to give the best of what I have in every encounter and in every engagement.

Curt: First of all, by recognizing that everyone is entitled to their own opinion ... they may not be entitled to their own facts, but they're entitled to their own opinion and, as such, you'd better respect their opinion. You can respectfully disagree, but you'd better respect their opinion. If you can take a very divisive subject and you can narrow it down to an element and define the problem ...

Most of the time we pass legislation and some people say it's a solution looking for a problem, but if you begin building consensus by finding agreement across a broad spectrum on what is the specific problem that you think you want to address, because if you have agreement on what the problem is, you're 90 percent down the pathway to finding a solution that would also have broad-based consensus.

Terie: I was not involved in politics very much before I ran for the legislature and so I really didn't know anyone. I didn't know who the players were. I didn't know not only what the issues were, but who the players were, and I think that's so critically important, to stretch yourself to figure out who is everybody, get to know them, figure out what you ... even people on the other side of the aisle.

One of the things I wish I knew right at the beginning was that some people who you might not think agree with you on anything, there's very often an issue or two out there on which you do agree. And finding those things out can really make your life easier when you're trying to build bipartisan support for legislation.

David: Recognize that you have your agenda, that every one of your colleagues has their own unique agenda, and be willing to spend as much time helping or more time helping your colleagues accomplish what they need. This will actually pay dividends when you need them to help you accomplish what you want.

And if all you do, if every conversation that migrates to what your top agenda is, that's all you talk about, very quickly you will be somewhat irrelevant in the process. But if you listen and try to help your colleagues first, then they will be there when you need their help.

Terie: I think it's really important just to get to know people as real people, and I think that's unfortunately something that's happening less and less. We tend to put labels on people and see them through those labels, and instead we should talk about our kids or our spouses or our grandkids or trips that we've taken, or just any interests that we have in ways to build real relationships, make friends with people.

And even the people that you might not want to be friends with, be friendly with them, and that way it'll come out ... Ohhhhhh, we agree on that? And so I think it's just be out there and talking to people and be friendly.

David: First of all, you can't be a one-trick-pony or a one-note-symphony. You may care about something, but you have to recognize that not everyone else cares about it. So you have to build a ... not just care about your one thing, but recognize every one of your colleagues has their one thing as well, and the reason I mention that is that may be your hot button ... everyone has their hot button and you need their support. So you can't have your hot button at the exclusion of anything else.

Gene: Norelli and Hutchinson say time management skills will be needed during your time in the legislature.

Terie: Managing your time is so important. You have often three, four places to be at once. In New Hampshire we only serve on one committee, but in many states members serve on multiple committees. So you may literally have two committee meetings going on at one time. Or there may be your committee meeting and somewhere else you're supposed to be presenting, introducing legislation that you have sponsored.

So I think doing the things that are most important to do, not trying to do everything, making sure that if you commit to someone to be someplace that you do show up. So don't just commit. Make sure you can be there before you commit.

I think you don't have to read everything. I think you don't have to be at every meeting. I think you do not have to go to every event in your district. But you need to pick the ones that are the most important, do what you can do while you are still taking care of yourself, staying connected with your family, staying grounded. You know, it can be a little heady sometimes—all of a sudden I have this important position and so I think I have to be everywhere. But really you need to make sure that you also stay really grounded at home.

Toi: We ought to be able to do more than one thing at one time. I raised three kids; it was more than one thing at one time. However, when it comes to time management in the legislature, recognize that you cannot say yes to everybody and everything, and that's OK. Work on what you are passionate about, and what you are passionate about, when you really apply effort and energy to what you are passionate about, what made you run for office in the first place, then your legislative wins will come and your ability to manage all this stuff will come, and the people that you represent will see it.

Gene: Perhaps the most important skills will be learning to take care of yourself.

Toi: You don't have to go to every single reception. You don't have to drink wine at every single reception. And when I first came in, I said yes to everything. Anybody that invited me anywhere, I said yes, and I went to everywhere. And you feel a pressure to do that when you first come in. And that affects your sleep and that affects your stamina.

You really do need to pay attention to taking care of yourself because these are long days and long weekends and they go into weekends and holidays and things like that if you really are doing everything that people expect of us. So, the No. 1 thing is to love yourself enough to know that you cannot take care of anybody else if you are not taking care of yourself. You just can't. And I'm all in that yes, you can have everything. Just not at the same time.

David: Part of the job is learning how to balance your home life and your personal life with the reality of politics. And in Indiana we also have other jobs as well. And I think I would have made more games with my kids than I did and it was hard to do it, but I should have pushed even harder.

You feel like you're torn in a lot of different directions. You get very, very busy. It's an important job. And so family life and keeping that focus as the center of your life is very important. I've got great kids, but I missed a few games and I wish I hadn't. That's very important for new legislators to keep in perspective. Don't lose sight of your friends at home. Keep those relationships close because this job can swallow you up, and will if you're not careful.

Toi: I had a circle of girlfriends who became surrogate mothers to my kids, who held me up when I was exhausted. If it ever looked like my head was getting too big, they'd be there to smack it right back down kind of thing. I was like oh, I have to go on this trip. They're like: We don't feel sorry for you; that's a cool place to go.

I would say the balance happens with knowing what your priorities are and keeping those priorities in their proper perspective, that if you don't take care of you, you can't take care of anybody else.

Terie: For me, and it actually took me a little while, I started doing yoga, and personally I found that I really learned how to breathe, I learned how to start a day at a slow and conscious pace, which helped me during the day and reminded me sometimes when things get hectic, just take a deep breath. Truly breathe and give yourself a moment before you go on to the next thing. It gives you an opportunity to clear your head and be ready for the next thing as well.

Toi: I'm trying now to incorporate a little bit more walking and exercise; I know I need to. I am trying to take some time to get some reading in and reading things that I want to read, not reading things that I have to read. I'm trying to spend more intentional time with people I care about, my family, my husband, my kids ... trying to do those things kind of just to keep myself balanced.

And that's another way that I practice self-care. And the biggest thing right now is: It's OK to put some social media down, because we are inundated with a lot of toxicity, I mean, just a lot of anger and angst and cynicism. And you need to protect your heart from that because I don't choose to live my life in a space of anger.

I choose to live my life and my career in a space of hopefulness and aspiration. That's what I choose to do. So things that aren't nourishing to me are the things that I don't want to have around me. And it's OK to put Facebook and Twitter and Instagram and everybody else's stuff away for a minute and just go inward to you and the people that you care about.

Gene: Taking the advice given here could lead to tremendous job satisfaction.

David: People need to understand when you're in the state legislature, in many ways you're going to impact your constituents far more than anybody in Washington, D.C., does, Congress. The laws that we pass in the legislature affect everybody every day in your state in very personal ways. And I think it's important to remember what an important job it is and how much you can impact life. You can make a big difference if you're engaged and you work hard and you're passionate about your work.

Freshman legislators, to embrace that and to have that focus on trying to make a difference, the time you spend in the state legislature, if you can make a difference, leave the place a better place than you found it and your constituents and your district better than you found it, you've done your job. And so embrace the fact that it's an important job. You can have a lot of fun with it. It's critical that you give it your heart and soul. If you can't do that, you shouldn't be there.

Curt: If they approach this with sincerity, it can be one of the greatest and most humbling experiences of their life. The opportunity to represent your neighbors, your friends, your community, is an incredible honor. But recognize that it is the office that deserves the respect, the institution that deserves the respect, and you're just a transient traveler passing through, whether it be for one term or 10 terms.

Music and Gene VO:

Gene: Join us next time for part two of "What I Wish I Knew" where we will dive into constituent services, mentorship and leadership, as well as relationships with the lobbyists and the media.

For the National Conference of State Legislatures, I'm Gene Rose. Thanks for listening.