



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 2) | OAS Episode 56**

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.

Welcome to part two of our series “What I Wish I Knew,” which features interviews with legislative leaders. They share insights to what they wish they knew when they started their legislative careers. In part one, they discussed the rules, the process, speaking on the chamber floor, and the importance of building good relationships.

In this episode, we dive into constituent services, mentorship and leadership, as well as relationships with the lobbyists and the media.

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.

Speaker Norelli says new legislators should keep in mind that the success of the job is not based on winning or losing.

Terie: I think the most important thing is remembering why you’re there. I think sometimes in the heat of things, it truly can occasionally feel like a game, a sport. You know, I’m at this to win. And I think that can be dangerous for people. I think the most important thing is to remind yourself often: Why am I here? Why am I doing this? It’s because I believe in issue X or Y. It’s because I have constituents who need me to be there for them.

Just remind yourself what’s important and then your game will be at its top, because that’s what will be inspiring you.

Gene: Here’s Utah State Senator, Curt Bramble.

Curt: Do what you think is right. You were elected because citizens had confidence in your ability to analyze and to represent them. Representing doesn’t always mean agreeing. Understanding is not agreeing. Listening is not agreeing. And recognize that those are not synonymous.

Gene: Here’s Illinois State Senator, Toi Hutchinson.

Toi: When someone calls my office for help, the response isn't: Did you vote for me? Are you a Democrat or are you a Republican? It's just: You live in the 40<sup>th</sup> district and you need help. I'm supposed to help. And it's the time you can put all of that stuff that happens on the field in a campaign aside because there's somebody that called you that needed help.

There are those moments when you could do something, you could see that it benefitted, it touched somebody's life. Sometimes incredibly personal things that happen to people, they want to know how to navigate state agencies, or something traumatic has happened in the family and you might grow a piece of legislation out of that.

Those times when you get to touch people in that way and you know ... it goes back to what I was saying—something has to be different or better because I was there, even if it's just for that one person.

Then there are the small times when someone calls really angry and you realize in 30 seconds that they really just want to be heard. They wanted to say what they needed to say and they wanted to know that somebody was listening to them. And so the first time someone said: I don't agree with anything you say politically, but I am so happy you listened to me, and I knew then that I've got to vote.

Because of that, like just because I did what my mother and my grandparents taught me to do, which is meet every person where they're at and understand that if I believe things really strongly, then so does somebody I'm talking to. And if I expect them to listen to me, I have to offer the same thing. And that's hard in this environment right now because we kind of reflexively fall back in our corners and we get defensive about the things that we believe in.

And it's amazing how much you learn when you just open up your heart and your ears just a little bit longer. So sometimes, you know, I would tell my colleagues when they first come in: spend a little bit more time listening with your heart.

Gene: Former Indiana State Senator David Long says new legislators have to be aware that constituents expect instant responses to their questions and comments.

David: Back in the day, it was still letter writing and things like that. Of course, now with instant communication, you don't have a week to get back to your constituent. They want a response to their email immediately, and they have access to you, and that's a good thing for the public. It's a tough thing for the legislator because it can overwhelm you.

In this world of instant communication, it is a real challenge to be able to stay in touch, but you have to respond to your constituents. They want to hear from you. Sometimes you have to take your time and there will be automatic responses: Thank you for your email; I'll get back to you; I do read my email. And you do.

But you need to respond. And you can't ignore your constituents. If you do it's to your peril because they'll remember. So as much as it's an irritant sometimes when you feel swamped and overwhelmed, stay in touch with the people who brought you to the dance. It's very important.

Gene: Senator Hutchinson says there are rewards for talking with constituents and others that seek out legislators to express their views. But Senator Bramble says you also have to learn how to say no.

Toi: For some people, the number of times they walk up to me and say: “I’ve never met a senator before”; or, “You don’t look like a senator.” And I get to say: What did you think a senator looks like? Let me add to that.

So, it is hard to manage all the people that you meet because at any given point in time it can be the advocates on an issue, it can be your other colleagues, it can be people in the other chamber, it can 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 try to give the best of what I have in every encounter and in every engagement. And that takes into account that sometimes I’m tired and sometimes I’m sick and sometimes I don’t feel good and sometimes I’m sad. I’m human just like everybody else.

But if you don’t like people, don’t do this job. I never understood politicians who don’t like people who still want to do this job. It’s like if you don’t like people, go sit down someplace.

Curt: The most sound advice I could give is to recognize that sometimes you have to say no to constituents. They play a critical role in our system.

I had the opportunity to put on seminars in Iraq. Where does legislation come from? How do you build consensus? How do you become a representative of the people? You don’t want to say no to constituents, but you’d better learn how to do it if you have to.

We are a constitutional republic, a representative democracy. We’re not peer democracy. And sometimes what constituents demand, you simply cannot in good conscience champion.

Gene: Building relationships with colleagues is critical, especially across the aisle, and even in the other chamber. But it’s also important to know who you’re talking to.

Curt: I think the most important relationship in terms of your job as a legislator ... you have relationships with constituents, with lobbyists, with your employees, with the executive branch, etc. There are all kinds of relationships. But one of the most important is building relationships with your colleagues.

And building relationships with your colleagues, both within your chamber, within your caucus, meaning the partisan side ... certainly you have to have support within your caucus; but building relationships across the aisle is critical, particularly in today’s vitriolic political environment; building relationships with members of the other chamber. You can’t suspend the rules and pass your bill if you’re a senator. You still have to navigate the House before it goes to the governor. The House still has to navigate the Senate.

So your relationships, both within your chamber and your caucus, across the aisle within your chamber, between the two chambers—you have to build relationships and build a relationship with the administration, so that when your bills do arrive on the governor's desk, they're going to see them as credible and well-reasoned because they understand who you are and where they come from.

I think that element of relationship building is critical.

David: Relationships are so important, not just with your caucus, but also across the aisle and with the House or Senate, depending on which body you're in. I can't emphasize that enough. If you don't have them, you're not going to be very successful.

I would encourage anybody who is new in this business not only to get to know your colleagues well and their backgrounds and whatnot, but get to know the people from the other party in the Senate or House, and get to know the people in the other body, House or Senate members. They are going to be critical to you passing legislation. They'll be sending you some stuff over time as a result too. And that is how you become successful.

Get to know people; get to trust people. I had some good people ... In Indiana the House was Democrat and the Senate Republican. That has changed back and forth in the House over the years, but I had some very kind people on the Democrat side take time to talk to me. I made some long-standing, 20-year friendships, good ones, with some Democrats who didn't need to do that to a freshman Republican senator, but took the time out of kindness to help me understand how I could be successful over in the House with them. That means a lot.

Seek those people out and you will be successful yourself.

Toi: There are no permanent friends; there are no permanent enemies. There are only permanent interests. People that you're opposed to now might be your best friends on another piece of legislation down the road. So do not ever burn bridges. This is a game of addition, not subtraction.

David: I had some things I knew I wanted to change: home rule, local government, typical clash between the state government and local government; give us more power; or something wasn't written very intelligently.

I made the mistake of walking in on an income tax law and talking to our finance chairman and telling him how dumb aspects of it were. He was generous enough to sit down with me and talk about it. I asked him who wrote the law and he said: I did. It took me a while to overcome that. He was not pleased with the whippersnapper coming in there and telling him how to do things.

Gene: New legislators also need to know that the political parameters of the legislature are subject to change.

Toi: I knew that there might come a time when Democrats in my state didn't control everything. So when I first came into the legislature we had a Democratic governor and we had majorities in both houses. Nearly eight years or seven years into my time in the Senate, that changed, and so we were faced with divided government. But because I spent so much time getting to know

people and establish relationships, when conventional wisdom said I didn't have to, we didn't have to talk to Republicans to pass anything we wanted to do.

So I became known for my bills where I got support. It sharpened my negotiation skills. And then when it came time to have divided government, I had friends and access to information and things that some of my colleagues didn't have. So I just knew that one day the pendulum was going to swing. I didn't know how it was going to swing.

And I would hope that in areas where you can find common ground, that the reverse is true today. So we just had an election in Illinois and we're back to having a Democrat governor and control in both chambers. But I also understand that you can't behave as though half the state doesn't exist or half the country doesn't exist.

It plays into every decision I make as the president of NCSL, as a state senator in a district where if you looked at the numbers and the demographics, it doesn't look like I should be the senator at all.

Gene: Also helpful is seeking out a mentor.

Terie: I had so many. There was a woman legislator who had actually first approached me about running and we became friends and rode often together to Concord. And so it wasn't a super formal mentorship, but certainly I would have conversations with her about what was going on in my committee and her committee, on the floor.

I think that my caucus leader was a mentor. My committee chair and my ranking member, so both the Republican and the Democrat who were leaders on the committee were both mentors in different ways. And I think those kinds of relationships can be formal or they can be informal, but I do think they're incredibly important.

I think one of the things that makes me the happiest is when somebody tells me that they considered me a mentor and I didn't even know it. So I don't think it has to be a formal relationship. I think it's just looking for someone who is willing to talk things over with you, give you advice, share their thoughts.

David: When I became the leader 12 years ago, we changed the system to make sure that each new legislator had a mentor assigned to them. Sometimes that doesn't work out and they find their own path, their own person that they're more in sync with. But the idea was to have someone you can talk to; you're not embarrassed to ask questions because you're not going to know everything.

Sometimes you don't want to let people know you don't know, even though they know that you don't know. OK? But it's important to have someone you can bounce ideas off of and talk to confidentially and ask: Why is this happening? What's the history of this? They'll tell you.

I sat between two pretty strong conservative Republicans on either side of me who didn't like big government and the red button saying TMG, Too Much Government type stuff. We didn't always agree, but they were sharp guys. They were both attorneys, as I am, and so I was able to

learn a lot from them. They were generous with their advice, which I needed. I was lucky to have that.

So, I think a mentor is very important for a new legislator. If you're not assigned a person, you need to find one. That will help you. Someone you can trust, you can talk to—I've found that to be a very important part of our training of our new legislators in Indiana. I think that's a program everyone should emulate.

Gene: Taking a leadership position is not meant for everyone, but there are different ways to demonstrate leadership in legislatures.

Curt: The interesting thing about leadership: There is elected leadership and then there are the natural leaders of the body. Sometimes they're the same; sometimes they're not. But leadership comes in all shapes and sizes and recognize that you may not be Senate president, you may not be speaker, but you can still be a leader. And if all you're doing is working to be speaker or Senate president, if that's your sole goal, you may be sorely disappointed.

Terie: I hope that things are changing today in the gender arena and that women are more willing to put themselves forward. For me personally, and I know for a lot of women, it takes being asked. And so perhaps this message is first of all to women: Don't wait to be asked. If you feel comfortable, if you want to take on a new challenge that will stretch your comfort zone a little bit, go and talk to somebody about it.

Go talk to your committee chair or the ranking member on your committee. Go talk to your caucus leader: Hey, I'd like to take on a little bit more here. Talk to some of the other people on your committee or other people who are in leadership and see what they did, or find yourself a mentor and work with that person.

Gene: Another acquired skill is working with lobbyists and learning how to keep a perspective in establishing trust.

Curt: Well, lobbyists come in contract lobbyists, industry lobbyists, work for companies, citizen lobbyists, activist lobbyists, homemakers who come and lobby. That term is probably applied to anyone that advocates for government.

Now, if they're a paid lobbyist recognize that, number one, they're paid for their opinion. Even my closest friends who have become lobbyists recognize that I may not agree with a particular position that their clients want and, to the extent that they're paid to have an opinion, separate friendship from policymaking.

David: Lobbyists have a job to do and they represent their constituents and their clients. You have to understand that. They don't necessarily have your best interests at heart. They may seem like your best friend and all that, but the reality is they've got a job to do, to represent their clients to the best of their ability.

As long as you keep that perspective, they can be a wealth of information. You have to balance it out with the other side. I think you have to listen to both sides on an issue. They understand that. They want to win their argument, but they also understand you've got a job to do.

The best lobbyists are those that make their point, make their case, don't overwhelm, you know, beat you over the head with it, and understand that you've got to ultimately make up your own mind. If you're fair and straight with people, I think that's all they can expect.

If you tell somebody you're going to vote a certain way and then you vote a different way, that will catch up with you, not only with your fellow legislators, but also with the people out in the hallway. So it's important to keep your word. If you have changed your mind, tell people that and tell them why. That's all they should expect. Don't surprise them by deciding at the last minute or you try to be nice to them, but you're really going to vote the other way. Just be straight with them. They can handle it. They're big boys and girls out there.

People do not respect someone who says they'll do one thing and then votes a different way. But it is your vote in the end. That's the one thing nobody owns but yourself, and you owe that to your constituents, to the way you think it's the right way to vote, and not to vote just to please people.

Remember, lobbyists can be a very good source of information. It may be one-sided, but it is information, and it's up to you to sort through that.

Gene: New legislators also must be prepared to interact with the media.

Curt: I have been fairly successful in my career. When the media asks a direct question, I prefer giving them a direct answer. And if you can establish credibility with the media, even though you suspect the media may have an agenda, they may be looking for the gotcha moment, if you're always straight up with them and you're genuine with them, at some point they will treat you as the genuine person that you are, giving you the benefit of the doubt that you don't have an ulterior motive, that you're not playing politician, that if you've been straight with them at every turn, they will accept that you're being straight up with them.

Building that relationship, knowing who they are, treating them with respect, even if you think they're holding you in contempt, is important.

David: The media has changed from when I first got in. It used to be that you had numerous people out there. It's gotten to be a much smaller group. The newspapers have been crushed by the modern world, the digital world we're in. So there isn't as much media coverage, which is actually not a good thing, because at least you could build relationships with reporters.

To the extent that there are some there and some regulars, being honest with them, straightforward with them, is important. Don't lead them down the primrose path on something where you think you're being cute. If you don't want to talk to them, don't talk to them. That's also OK. Just understand that they've got a job to do.

If it's important for you to communicate with them or talk with them, do it and be straight-up about it. They'll know if you're a straight shooter or not, and I can't emphasize how important that is as well. If you're a person who's a BS artist, if you want to call it that, they're going to know it and it's not going to serve you well.

But the modern legislator will not be facing as much media scrutiny as in the past because simply, the media has changed and there's not as much coverage of state houses as there used to be just because there aren't as many newspapers, TV stations etc. have lower/smaller budgets. It's a good and bad thing.

But in its place comes the podcast, comes your Twitter account, comes your social media, your Facebook. So you have a little more control over the message. It's important to use those tools. Reach out to your constituents, stay in communication through that as well; build that base. You'll have a communications department that should be helping you with that. Take advantage of it; embrace it. There are a lot of people there to help you do your job. Use them.

Gene: The staff is the backbone of legislative operations. Realizing the importance of their contributions is necessary.

David: And I will tell you also, the people that take care of you down there, your staff are critical to your success as well. Some people are really good bosses and some are really lousy bosses. I will tell anyone who is new at this: Take care of those who take care of you. Be good to your staff. Be good to your legislative assistant and your communications people, the policy people, the people who help you look good and do your job well.

If you don't, you'll be a pariah down there. They all know who the bad bosses are, the people who are rude or arrogant or feel like they have to be tough on this, or just don't understand how to work with people. That will catch up with you.

So, make sure that you build a good relationship and that you're fair with your staff and reasonable, and have reasonable expectations of what your staff should or shouldn't be doing. That will serve you well.

Gene: Something that is not always obvious to new legislators is how the budget process directly impacts policy issues.

Toi: Right now, if there was a thing that I didn't know that I would have to deal with, it was how well people use budget fights to make policy decisions. That can turn policy debates into political debates when they really should be about policy outcomes.

And I think that's a really big problem in our body politic today overall, that we are not giving the full breadth of conversation that we need to, because when you talk to regular people on the street and you just present a problem and you don't tell them where the solution came from; you just present a problem and say these are some of the things that are affecting us: We have more hybrids and electric cars on the roads today, which means people aren't spending as much money on gas—that's great for the consumer; it's not great for the pot of money it takes for us to do infrastructure repairs and road repairs.

And because we spent 40 to 50, almost 60 years now talking about taxes without talking about what taxes pay for, that's how we're in this situation where we're making policy decisions using budgetary political fights to do it, which I think does all of us a disservice. That understanding and knowledge as I've grown as a legislator becomes increasingly more difficult, increasingly more complicated because the problems are getting bigger and more complicated and more



complex since when we had the easy time to fix it, we bypassed that and now we're at a point where almost everything you decide to do is hard at a moment in time when we're the most entertained and the least informed.

Gene: Objectively assessing successes and failures will help new legislators become more effective in the future.

Terie: It's been my habit to kind of take a look back and assess what happened on any of the big fights in which I've been involved. Whether you feel that the outcome you wanted was what happened or not, take a look back and say: What did I do right? What might I do a little bit differently next time? Did I make sure that I have friends, colleagues on the other side of the issue to make sure that we kept the conversation and the debate about the issue and not about personalities?

I can still go up to that person and say: We had a good debate, but there's nothing personal in that. Just try to learn from the way that you did it, win or lose.

Gene: New legislators have access to incredible resources at the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Toi: I am very blessed to be able to have minute-by-minute access to the best policy research from these staffers at NCSL that I could ever ask for. And when you take advantage of all that NCSL has to offer, then it makes you a better legislator.

There are many states, people will find when they first come into office, where there is a significant amount of staff, and there are some states that don't have that luxury at all. You have to take it upon yourself to figure out how to make yourself an expert in the things that you really want to work on. And that is another reason why NCSL is such an amazing research for not only the nearly 7,400 legislators across the country, but the 25,000 staff across the country.

I come to this because when I came into the legislature, I came as a former staffer, so I've seen this from all different sides and I know, I know that the information that I have and I'm able to present, the better I do it is because I'm surrounded by people who are brilliant. We don't give enough credit to the people that make legislatures run and provide us the policy expertise and the research and the stuff to back up what it is we're saying.

How I make myself an expert is that I've been incredibly blessed enough to find this organization, both when I was a staffer and as a member, and so I feel like it's my duty to give back to NCSL what it gave to me.

Gene: NCSL President Toi Hutchinson has one final piece of advice.

Toi: I wish you all the best. I hope that you see the incredible amount of joy that comes with knowing that you did something for somebody else. I hope you rest before the legislative sessions start. And because of where we are in this country and how complicated our relationships are and all that goes into the way we live and do politics, keep your hands and feet inside the vehicle at all times 'cause it's about to be a pretty bumpy ride.

But if you know why you're there, if you know what you're willing to lose over more than what you'll say to win, then all of this makes sense and it will all fall into place. So, God speed and good luck and congratulations.

Music and Gene VO:

Gene: And that concludes our two-part series of "What I Wish I Knew." Our thanks to Utah State 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.

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