

Sunday Editorial

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A call for togetherness

New chairman of Metro Chamber of Commerce challenges political parties

Oklahoma legislators — particularly Republicans — have been challenged to drop partisanship and act in the best interests of the state.

That is not a new message but it comes from the incoming chairman of the Tulsa Metro Chamber of Commerce.

It means more because the new chairman is Robert "Bob" Poe, a solid Republican who has haunted the halls of the Legislature as part of a Tulsa group formed to obtain additional money — and fairness — for Tulsa.

Poe's challenge comes as the political parties are deep in a fight for control of the Legislature. Republicans are hoping to ride the "no new tax" stand into power. Democrats, on the other hand, are so cowed by the prospect of losing control that they fear even using the tax word.

The result is that Oklahoma, its teachers, its health care systems, its human services, its judicial system and its law enforcement all are at the lowest ebb in decades. Both sides are so fearful of the tax word that they



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won't even allow Oklahomans to vote on a tax measure.

Think about it. Citizens aren't allowed the right to vote because a group of lawmakers are too frightened to put tax questions before the people.

Poe called on Republicans to avoid signing "pledges" to oppose any tax increase whatsoever.

He referred to such a pledge exacted from legislators, mostly Republicans, before last year's session by the state Chamber of Commerce. Dick Rush, the state chamber executive secretary, said his board of directors has decided to abandon the pledges this year. Instead, the state chamber will consider tax measures on a case-by-case basis.

Pressuring lawmakers to decide financing matters before they even know the actual financial picture of the state is tantamount to poisoning the wells.

Burns Hargis, a well-known Republican Party operative and president of the Oklahoma City Chamber of Com-

merce, was sitting with Poe Tuesday at the Tulsa Chamber's annual meeting.

He said later he agreed with Poe but suggested there could be some debate over how the new cigarette tax money is used. Translation: We're going to argue this one to death. Poe said lawmakers ought to vote for taxes "now," and promised he would support any Republican or Democrat criticized for a tax vote or any other measure the Legislature might pass to help Oklahoma through a rough economic time.

The new chairman promised to "walk the halls" of the Capitol seeking health-care reform, tort reform and education causes.

He said governments at the city, county and state level "are broke," and that health care needs in Tulsa are overpowering. He talked of the inequity that Tulsa has suffered for decades because Oklahoma City gets far more state money for health care than Tulsa.

In calling for a political truce and an end to the "no new tax" pledge, he specifically called for an increase in the state cigarette tax, which is one of the lowest in the nation.

He said money from an increased cigarette tax should be divided, with 25 percent each for Tulsa and Oklahoma City and 50 percent for the rest of

the state.

Poe said that in addition to helping finance health-care needs, a higher cigarette tax would curb smoking, in itself a major factor in health care.

He said that for every 10 percent increase in the cigarette tax, there is a 17 percent reduction in smoking.

Trauma care, he said, is a "life-or-death" matter. Someone injured in Miami, for example, might live if taken to Tulsa, but might die if forced to travel to Oklahoma City.

Trauma care is so important, he said, that he would favor an extra \$7 to \$9 tax on automobile tags to raise the money needed.

Poe urged both lawmakers and citizens to become involved, especially the 160,000 employees of the 2,300 companies and businesses that are a part of the chamber.

He cited Tulsa's lopsided vote in favor of Vision 2025 as evidence of the county citizens' willingness to face area problems. He said the chamber was a primary reason the measure passed, noting that its members raised \$750,000 to finance a hard-fought campaign.

Ron King, the outgoing chamber chairman, was a central figure in that drive, providing, Poe said, a steady, consistent and calm outlook for everyone.

As Poe noted, there were many law-

makers in the audience Tuesday and there were some who want to be lawmakers.

The stars of Vision 2025 — County Commissioner Bob Dick and Tulsa Mayor Bill LaFortune, were recognized for their effort.

No amount of reason has swayed the state chamber and the lawmakers in the past.

Let's be clear: No one wants higher taxes. But the state is suffering. Education suffers. Health care and human services are hurting.

It is time for lawmakers to seriously consider a plan that University of Oklahoma President David Boren has espoused. Raise some taxes now. Include a provision that the taxes be removed after state income reaches a certain level.

Did Poe's public scolding of legislators help? Maybe.

Will the other major chambers in the state follow his lead?

Will they back him and pressure lawmakers to put aside partisan gain (for once) and work for Oklahoma?

It's hard to say. It's seldom happened in Oklahoma history.

But Poe has certainly given them their marching orders.

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What's missing?

Production of goods doesn't match job picture

Maybe I'm missing the message, but there seems to be something a little strained in all the recent happy talk about the improving jobs picture.

No question the numbers have been improving. New claims for unemployment benefits declined again last week for the second time in a row. The stock market spiked briefly and the news commentators agreed that it was more evidence of a lasting recovery.

Trouble is, the media optimism about jobs doesn't jibe with other news we have been reading for months.

Last July, Ford Motor Co. announced plans to cut white collar jobs in order to reduce costs related to the salaried work force by 10 percent by the end of 2003. Last week, the company reported a \$1.6 billion annual profit, its first since 2000. It also reported a fourth-quarter loss of \$793 million in spite of the fact that it cut expenses by \$3.2 billion last year. Ford said it would try to cut an additional \$500 million in expenses at the beginning of 2004.

Detroit, of course, has been through rough patches before. It has always recovered, and it will again. But the point is that there is nothing in this news to suggest that this huge employer will soon be hiring large numbers of new workers in this country.

General Motors reported a small drop in profits last quarter. Most of the earnings came from financial operations, not from the sale of cars and trucks. At the same time, management announced it would continue "to work on structural costs and material costs." It wasn't clear how much of this continued cost-cutting would fall on personnel. But again, there was little in the report to point to substantial new hiring in the United States.

Some other flagship American employers have reported better earnings and better prospects for immediate growth. But they have made it clear that if jobs do increase, many of them will go overseas.

In a worldwide conference call to managers last July, IBM executives said they expected



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three million service jobs — including high-paying white collar positions — would go for foreign workers by 2015.

"Our competitors are doing it and we have to do it," said Tom Lynch, IBM's director for global employee relations. His remarks were taken from a recording provided to the Washington Alliance of Technology Workers.

Procter & Gamble recently completed a two-year consolidation of certain management and personnel functions. As part of the plan, the company created three new "shared service centers" in the Philippines, Costa Rica and the United Kingdom.

"P&G's the leader," Dennis A. McGuire told The Times. McGuire is president of TPI, a consulting firm that helps firms move white-collar jobs overseas.

Oracle, the business software giant, announced plans last summer to enlarge its workforce in India from 3,200 to 6,000. These are new jobs. The company can say they will not be at the expense of U.S. workers. But they won't help employment in this country either.

All of these items help explain why American business continues to show big increases in productivity. Productivity can mean turning out more goods and services at less cost with fewer or lower-paid workers.

In the long run, increased productivity has always helped the economy by making everything we need more plentiful and cheaper to buy.

But the adjustment is slower than usual this time. By one measure, more than two million American jobs have disappeared in the last few years. For those workers, it is not enough to say everything will get better in the long run.

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WHAT HAPPENED TO MARS ROVER?

Iowans understood warning from San Francisco

SAN FRANCISCO — Gavin Newsom, 36, a fourth-generation San Franciscan who has just become this city's youngest mayor in a century, is, of course, a Democrat. He also is tall, dark and handsome, a self-made millionaire from restaurant and wine businesses, whose wife is described as a prosecutor, television legal analyst and "former lingerie model." Newsom barely won, even though he was endorsed by Democratic luminaries Bill Clinton, Al Gore and most of the presidential aspirants. But not by Howard Dean, which may say something about the limits of impulsive liberalism.

Newsom and his opponent, Matt Gonzalez, were on the 11-member Board of Supervisors, only two of whom supported Newsom. Gonzalez, the Green Party candidate, ran an Internet-driven campaign and spent one-tenth as much as Newsom but got 47 percent of the vote. Gonzalez received 10,000 more votes than Newsom on election day, but lost when the absentee ballots were counted. San Franciscans had endured three elections in 62 days — the gubernatorial recall (the city voted 80 percent against recalling Gray Davis), the first mayoral election, then the Newsom-Gonzalez runoff — which may have dampened the enthusiasm of all but political enthusiasts, who in this city are to the left of the salad fork.

Gonzalez, who once played in a punk rock band, portrayed Newsom as a protégé of outgoing — in several senses — Mayor Willie Brown, which is true. And as a child of privilege, which is nonsense. Newsom was raised by a single mother who worked two jobs. Although Gonzalez wants it known that he sleeps on a futon in an apartment he shares with three other ascetics, he refused to release his tax returns.

This city has, well, *distinctive* demographics. Reversing the national average, there are twice as many renters (65 per-



GEORGE WILL

The city has about as many camels as Republicans, so Newsom is called a 'conservative.'

cent) as homeowners. Renters, responding to the severe housing shortage that is predictably exacerbated by rent control, predictably demand more controls. They say rent control is a "diversity" measure, preventing the city from being swamped by people willing to pay the market price of housing.

Seventy percent of adults here are single. The city evidently has more dogs than children, and Newsom says the endorsement of a dog — well, dog owners — political action committee is much coveted. But strike the word "owners." Gonzalez authored the ordinance stipulating that pets will also have "guardians." Can you be arrested for saying just "owner"? Newsom languidly says, "You don't get arrested for much else out here."

The city has about as many camels as Republicans, so Newsom is called a "conservative." This smear gained currency even though Newsom supports "transgender rights," meaning the city pays for its employees' sex change operations, including — this may be more than you want to know — expensive hormone treatments. Newsom courted the large LGBTIQI constituency, an acronym he can almost explain. It stands for lesbians,

gays, bisexuals, transgender people, questioners and "intersex." What is that last group? He is not sure.

Newsom does say inflammatory (to "progressives") things like: "You can't redistribute wealth you don't have." And he does not share progressives' enthusiasm for shuffling students around to fine-tune each school's "diversity index." There are fewer than 60,000 public school pupils left, half of whom speak a language other than English at home. Newsom says the high school dropout rate is high, and the average Latino grade is only slightly higher than the African-American average of D or D-plus.

San Francisco spends more than any other city on the homeless, so naturally it has more homeless people per capita than any other city. Newsom authored the "Care not Cash" bill to provide treatment and housing rather than cash, which attracts the homeless, who use cash injudiciously. Voters loved Newsom's idea, but progressives like Gonzalez and their allies in the judiciary have blocked it.

Newsom says "no one knows" how many homeless there are, partly because progressives have blocked the gathering of data. He guesses there are between 5,000 and 15,000, with a chronic street population of 3,500. Arrest someone for aggressive panhandling and, Newsom says, a pro bono attorney appears to fight a \$50 fine that cannot be collected anyway.

Gonzalez did what Dean has done: he told the left that its hour had come around at last. The Iowa result suggests that Democrats understand the warning that radiates from San Francisco, America's most hospitable habitat for Deanism.

That impulse, or something very like it, crested short of victory. If it can't make it here, it can't make it anywhere.

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