

ADDRESS TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEAKER JIMMY NAIFEH

JANUARY 14, 1997

Speaker pro-tem DeBerry. Majority Leader Hargrove. Minority Leader McDaniel. To all my distinguished colleagues who have previously served in this Chamber or who are here for the very first time. To my family and friends and to your family and friends.

I begin by thanking every member of this body for the honor and privilege of serving as your Speaker. I will make two simple commitments to each of you. First, my door and my mind will always be open. Second, whether you're a committee chairman or a freshman legislator, I will always try to treat you with the respect and dignity that your constituents expect you to have and that you deserve to have.

For 18 men and women of this body, today marks the beginning of a tremendous chapter in your life. Most of you offered yourselves for public service for a reason that has nothing to do with partisan politics. A few moments ago, you took a solemn oath because you genuinely care about the quality of life for your families and your communities. Whether you remain in this body for two years or two decades, keep your eye on that simple goal. That goal is more important than any Speaker, or any Governor, or any political party. It is more important than who chairs a committee or who gets credit for passing legislation.

I have had the privilege of serving in this House for twelve years with Democratic administrations and ten years with Republican administrations. Taken as a whole, these were years marked by a cooperation between the executive and legislative branches found in few other states. It was a time when we were able to make some remarkable progress for the communities represented in this room.

States all across the country began taking notice of what was happening in Tennessee. We created record growth in personal income. We passed some of America's most creative programs for education and health care reform. For two years in a row, we were called the best managed state government in America.

Based on the latest Administration's estimates, we face a 100 million dollar shortfall this year and upwards of a 300 million dollar shortfall next year. We, along with the Administration, have a responsibility to address this problem and take measures to insure that our programs are adequately funded for years to come. And we must do that with no new statewide tax increases.

I call on our Finance, Ways & Means Committee to make a thorough and complete review of the Budget so it can provide this House with assurances that the State Budget is responsible and without waste. I am directing the staff of the House to provide our Finance Committee with the proper resources and assistance to conduct that review.

Five years ago, the Tennessee General Assembly and Governor Ned McWherter made a landmark commitment to Tennessee schoolchildren. With the massive amounts of new funding brought to Tennessee school systems through the Basic Education Program, it was absolutely critical that there be a comprehensive accountability system in place, so that Tennessee taxpayers could see that their money was being invested wisely.

For nearly 30 years, the General Assembly in Tennessee has placed its trust in the Tennessee Higher Education Commission to provide a measure of accountability and professional oversight for the millions of dollars appropriated for higher education each year. Recent events at THEC have shaken some of my confidence in that body's ability to provide the accountability that we need.

I am, therefore, asking the House Education Committee to determine whether the current governance structure addresses the needs of our state as we prepare to enter the 21st Century.

Regardless of that Committee's recommendations, we must expand significantly the accountability system for higher education in our state. Already there are efforts underway in higher education to improve in that area. I ask that our Education Committee work with all appropriate parties to develop a uniform, statewide accountability system to ensure that the State taxpayer's money is being well spent.

Government must be efficient and at the same time effective. I read recently of the Governor's intent to move all Department staff attorneys into one department and to create a larger Department of Public Health. It is said this is being done in the interest of efficiency. I applaud any efforts that actually streamline government. However, because I nor other members of this Chamber have received any documentation of how these moves will save money or make government work better, I cannot, at this time, endorse these specific moves.

I am not for big government. No one is. This House will seek effective, good government. We should not make wholesale moves in departments just for the sake of making moves--we must do so because it is the right thing to do. That's why I am calling on our Government Operations Committee to review any such proposals and to make sure that such moves will be beneficial to the taxpayers of this State.

In order to improve our own efficiency in the House, I am calling on this body to make two significant changes. One involves the Rules of this Chamber. I announced yesterday that this body should create a new full standing Committee, named the Children and Family Affairs Committee. This Committee is necessary because this body needs to direct more attention to the concerns of children and families. This State must continue to take aggressive steps to curb problems in the specific areas of domestic violence and juvenile crime. This Committee is also designed to create a more efficient, faster way for bills to be heard making the entire House operate more effectively.

I also call on this body to take another step to aid in the efficiency of Government. Every year, we are faced with numerous requests to create special study committees to address issues that would be better addressed in some other manner. If we are going to commit our time and money to study something, let's study those things that are important--like how to lower the crime rate in this State, how to better educate our children, and how to provide affordable, necessary health care to our citizens. Please work with me to cut down on the number of study committees that we request.

As many of you did, I spent the last several months talking to people in my district, going door-to-door, and listening to the concerns of my constituents. The people wanted to know where I stood on issues and how I had voted. What they did not like and what they truly resented was campaign information that was false; pamphlets and newspaper ads that were just plain wrong. I know and you know that politics can be tough and campaigns can test one's character. What I have trouble with is campaign information that is false. I have asked my staff to research this issue and see if we can make our campaigns for public office races of substance instead of smears. And if we can come up with legislation that helps voters go to the polls more informed and with a better understanding of the issues, I will place my name first on the sponsor line and I will pass that bill.

We have a great deal to do in the next few months. We will review issues as diverse as the Interstate Compact Act and Welfare Reform. We will review the conclusions of the Death Penalty Committee. We will debate measures that deal with education. And we will focus on reducing crime in our communities.

As complicated as some of these issues may get, the issue always boils down to one simple question and it is one that you and I should always ask ourselves: will it make Tennessee a better place to live for the people I represent? For it is those people who sent us here and for whom we proudly have taken the oath of office today.

For those of you who have served in this body, I welcome you back. For those of you here for the first time, I welcome you to one of the most important jobs you will undertake in your lifetime. We have vital issues to tackle and critical

decisions to make this Session. I ask that you join with me to make this, the 100th General Assembly, truly historic.

Thank you.