

Tuesday, January 8, 1991 - - First Organizational Day

Remarks

Ladies and gentlemen of the House, thank you for the honor you have bestowed on me today. It's an honor I promise I will work tirelessly to uphold.

There are several things I want to say to you today, but before I begin, I want you to meet some people who are very important to me. [Recognize Oney, Jim, Beth, Sameera, Joe and Johnny, and campaign chairman.]

Becoming Speaker of the Tennessee House of the Representatives has been a goal of mine for a long time. I've made no bones about it. And when you set goals, in my opinion you should go about working to make those goals a reality. I thank all my colleagues here today for helping me do that.

As I thought about the oath I'd be taking today (or at least I hoped I would; David and Shirley, and a few of the others gave me reason to pause for awhile), I couldn't help but reflect on the Speakers who have Served before me. There have been two during my 16 years in the Legislature.

There was Ned McWherter, the "ease along" Speaker who accomplished more with less friction than anybody I've ever known. Then, there was our Speaker for the last four years, Ed Murray. Ed could listen to a problem that some of us had been arguing about for days and, in a matter of minutes, point out the obvious solution. And his quick wit could penetrate even the most tense of situations.

But the job of Speaker is not only an honor, it's an awesome responsibility. Having served as Majority Leader for over six years, I fully recognize the responsibilities attached to all our leadership positions, including that of Speaker.

Each Speaker who has served this House is unique, each had his own style, and each made his own contributions. Each Speaker, in my opinion, was the right Speaker for the times.

And now as the new Speaker, I have to ask myself, "What do the times require?" Members of the House, these are serious times. I can recall years when the mood was different, when there was much light-heartedness, when there was a feeling of confidence, a feeling of pride in being one of the most elite groups of people in the country, one of 99 individuals who had been chosen to represent nearly 5 million of their peers.

But we're gathered here today in much more somber settings. While we all are proud to be here, we are very much aware of the cloud that hovered over us for the past three years.

Legislators are no different from anyone else. When our integrity is questioned, we become defensive. We want to place the blame on someone else, so we wonder why those who came before us didn't put more safeguards in place. We want to question the motives of those involved in the investigation...so we charge partisan politics. We want to blame the public's distrust of us on distortion of the facts, so we complain about sensational reporting by the news media.

The fact is, all of the blame-shifting and all of the rationalizing are a waste of time. The fact is, regardless of who's right or wrong, the end result is the same--our credibility with the public has taken a beating. This entire body has the responsibility to regain the public's trust. It must be our first order of business. If not, no other business we undertake will have the support of the people.

You and I, perhaps more than any of our predecessors, have an obligation to the public, an obligation to dispel the cloud, to give politics a good name, to restore the public's confidence in public officials and in our lawmaking process. Two years ago, this legislature established the Registry of Election Finance to oversee campaign financing and disclosure. Last year, the House established a legislative committee to work with the Registry and also set up a bi-partisan group of three Democrats and three Republicans to stay on top of ethics issues. All these people have worked diligently and have recommendations to this body during the legislative session.

I look forward to reviewing those, but I have a few proposals I want to make to you today:

First, I ask this House to support me in requiring anyone who holds a House leadership position, and who should come under indictment, to step down from that position. I would include in that category anyone elected by their respective Caucuses, and all of the House committees.

Second, I have legislation ready for introduction that will address the following areas:

- 1) It will improve conflict of interest disclosure because the public has a right to know the sources of a legislator's income.*
- 2) It will address the use of campaign funds for private purposes because contributions made to political campaigns should be used for political campaigns.*
- 3) It will place limitations on large contributors to campaigns because big-dollar influence has gotten out of hand in our election process.*

I also want to issue a challenge to you today. This challenge has to do with another type of ethic--one that I feel very strongly about--and that's the work ethic.

Sometimes the most effective legislator isn't the smartest, nor the most articulate, nor the most experienced legislator. Not everyone can be those things. But every one of us elected to the General Assembly can work hard. That's what the public expects of us—to work hard at understanding the issues, at keeping in touch with our constituents, at attending all meetings and at making sure the process works for the good of this state.

I believe the voters' charge to us is that simple. And I'm going to do everything I can to see that we take that charge seriously, beginning with leadership.

Every person elected or appointed to a leadership position will have a job description and a role to play, not just a title after his or her name.

Each one of you here today has a responsibility to the people who elected you and we, as leaders of this House, have a responsibility to you, the members who elected us.

This 97th General Assembly has the honor of kicking off the new decade. I believe our work will be the springboard that moves us into the 21st Century.

It's been said this may very well be the most important General Assembly in recent history of the state. I don't know if it will or not. The issues are certainly there to make it so—education and tax reform, reapportionment, healthcare, the environment, jobs and, of course, ethics are all going to be topics debated by this body. What the outcome will be, I don't know.

But I do know one thing: the members of this General Assembly are up to the task. We lose 22 incumbents this election year and anytime you lose incumbents, you lose experience. But what we've gained in our new members is enthusiasm, new ideas and a fresh approach to the process. If we take the idealism of our new people and temper it with the experience of our old-timers, we get progress, and that's the kind of team we're going to be.

Everybody has something to offer--Democrats, Republicans, freshmen, senior members, everybody. Let one thing be clear, every member of this House will receive a fair hearing on every bill.

My pledge to the public is to have a fair, honest and hard-working House of Representatives. You and I both know the standards we set for this body will have to be high in order to accomplish this goal. I ask you to help me make good on this pledge to the public who elected us. It is my goal as Speaker to prove that we are the right General Assembly for our times.