

The Virginia NEWS LETTER

The Legacy of Governor Dalton

By John H. Chichester

Senator Chichester made this address at The Governor's Project conference at the University of Virginia. The project is sponsored by the Center for Governmental Studies and the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service.

A hard as it seems for many of us to believe, nearly a generation has passed since John Dalton left public office 18 years ago.

The Virginia he knew and loved—the Commonwealth he served with such ability and devotion—has in many ways changed beyond recognition. No student of John Dalton's life and times can help but feel the deepest regret that he died so young. The tragedy of his untimely death reminds us, too, of the debt this generation of Virginians owes to him for his principled but practical leadership.



John H. Chichester

Governor Dalton was never one to look longingly to a past long gone—and, if we respect his legacy, neither should we. Today, two decades later, we meet to learn from his life, to measure our own faithfulness to the legacy he left, and finally to consider how we—looking to the future—might apply those values which defined his public life to the central issues facing us today.

Commitment to Fiscal Responsibility

I begin where John Dalton so often began—with fiscal responsibility.

John Dalton knew what every governor of Virginia comes to know—and what every public servant should know: that the success of public service is measured first by its impact on the well-being of its citizens and second by the fiscal integrity of its stewardship.



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He understood completely that part of his sacred trust as governor was to bequeath to his successor and to future generations a state government that is responsive and well managed but is also capable of meeting the Commonwealth's essential needs and challenges.

He devoted much of his energy as governor to meeting that trust and accomplishing those goals. For that reason, he dismissed sweeping spending initiatives. He preferred instead to concentrate on changing the shape, mindset, and operating practices of state government—preparing state government and Virginia for the future that would come long after he left office.

In that, he was conservative—but not in the way that term is so often tossed around or used to label public figures today. If we apply to him today's misinterpretation of that label, then we miss the full measure of the man.

John Dalton was conservative in the literal sense of the word: careful, businesslike, systematic, and prudent. He wanted to keep what was best about the Virginia he loved, but he wanted Virginia to grow and to prosper as well.

He labored mightily to control the growth of state government—and state employment in particular—because he felt strongly that the state should provide only those services which could not be provided by the private sector. He often said that he hoped to give Virginia's citizens “better government, not more government.” He often cited slowing the growth of state government as one of his principal accomplishments.

He routinely listed as his objectives the qualities which we take as givens today: accountability, increased productivity, and efficiency.

And yet he was not a fan of tying the hands of future leaders. He regarded the collective will of elected officials as the only tool necessary to ensure fiscal discipline.

He found the idea of raising taxes distasteful. And yet, he did not shrink from fiscal challenges—even when he concluded that what was required was additional revenue. In his 1980 State of the Commonwealth address, advocating an increase in the gas tax, he told the General Assembly and all who were listening:

“I know full well that none of us wants to impose additional taxes on our citizens, but I remind you that the concept of fiscal responsibility means not only limiting the tax burden upon our citizens but also meeting their essential needs.”

His courage and wisdom can still speak volumes to us today. If he were here, I think he would tell us this:

- Control the growth of new government programs. There is a limit to what state government can do and should do for its citizens and businesses.
- Understand that government does have a role in ensuring a minimum level of services statewide. Concentrate your resources on meeting essential public needs: improving the quality of life, investing in education, preserving public safety, and providing a safety net for the Commonwealth's most vulnerable citizens.
- Preserve your fiscal flexibility. Be very careful about undertaking new commitments that grow substantially over time. Avoid borrowing to meet expenses that should be covered from current revenues. Accept that there are always going to be events—economic downturns, oil embargoes, court cases, and the like—which will require fiscal flexibility to address.
- Look beyond the present and beyond your term. Understand always that, once you are elected, your responsibility is to prepare Virginia for the future.

His Approach to Being Party Leader and Governor

If we were to stop with John Dalton's commitment to fiscal responsibility, we would have learned a great deal. But there is much more we can learn from him, because even a casual observer would see John Dalton as one of the most important figures in the history of the modern Republican Party.

John grew up at the knee of the man most often regarded as the father of the modern Republican Party in Virginia, Ted Dalton. He was just 13 when Ted was first elected to the Virginia Senate. And, when Ted Dalton began running for Governor in 1953, John had just graduated from William and Mary (having been president of the student body). Politics—and particularly Republican politics—was therefore a natural part of John's life.

Building the Republican Party was an abiding occupation for John Dalton—one which was rewarded in surprising ways. How many know, for example, that when he went to a Republican convention to pick a candidate for President, he met his future wife, Eddy, a vital force in John Dalton's journey to the Executive Mansion?

As a party leader, Governor Dalton was both tactically clever and strategically astute. He was instrumental in bringing together Main Street businessmen, traditional Republicans, and disaffected Democrats—organizing a powerful coalition from which the modern Republican Party emerged.

Many great party leaders, however, fail to appreciate the difference between running a campaign and managing the government. John Dalton was not one of those.

His political skills were matched by an impressive talent for both leading and governing. John Dalton understood that campaigning is about defining differences, but that governing is about bridging differences and building coalitions. Real leaders know this instinctively.

John Dalton was a strong partisan, but not a foolish one. He prized party loyalty, but he was not blinded by it. It is difficult to imagine him appointing or discharging any public official solely based on party allegiance.

My own conversations with him during his term as governor and afterwards focused exclusively on his plans and hopes for the future of Virginia—not on the ebb and flow of party affairs.

In his inaugural address, Governor Dalton telegraphed his intent to reach out beyond party circles, saying:

“My administration will seek counsel and advice from many sources, and we will seek talent from many sources. Virginia is not a closed corporation, it is a public corporation, and it will be operated in the public interest.”

His relationship with the General Assembly is a case in point. He routinely consulted with Democrats in the General Assembly about his plans and priorities, even to the point of occasionally attending committee meetings to listen, discuss, or persuade. For their part, legislators granted to John Dalton substantial latitude to reduce state employment and control spending—two of his top objectives.

Some might be tempted to dismiss this as smart politics or political necessity, inasmuch as Democrats held a substantial majority in both houses. But—if you do—you again miss the full dimension of John Dalton.

John Dalton had served in the General Assembly for a number of years, including a period on the House Appropriations Committee. He understood the role of the legislature and he accepted it, often referring to it as his “Board of Directors.” He regarded many members—of both parties—as his friends. And, despite their party affiliation, he regarded many Democrats as philosophical compatriots. John

Dalton refused to draw a box around himself and thereby limit his effectiveness.

All governors want things “their way.” Some have an easier time than others accepting that they will not always get it. The framers of our Constitution set things up this way intentionally, and I would suggest that this is exactly the creative tension that has produced the quality of government we too often take for granted.

Great governors are remembered for more than their dates of service and, in my view, John Dalton was a great governor.

Upon taking the Oath of Office, he promised a “partnership for progress”—a New Dominion that would unite the best of what Virginia had been with the prospect of all that Virginia could become.

He practiced the politics of common sense.

“In my judgment,” he said, “the people want government that is effective—that will work to solve their problems. The people are more interested in solutions than slogans.”

He went on to say:

“The results of the balloting two months ago . . . show that the people of Virginia still believe in the middle way—the way of moderation, of prudence, of reliance on time-tested principle. That is not to say they are content with everything the way it is, because they certainly are not. They are looking for continued progress and positive change, and all they ask is that we . . . have the courage and wisdom to . . . lead them into a better tomorrow.”

Looked at from the perspective of two decades later, John Dalton’s career reminds us of a time when the campaign stopped once the voters rendered their verdict—when decision-making was guided by public interest rather than political polls—when being the Governor of Virginia was regarded as the capstone of a career in public service, and when politics was fun and not a blood sport.

As his final State of the Commonwealth address drew to a close, John Dalton paused to reflect on his four years as Governor, and spoke the words which perhaps best capture the spirit and purpose of his term. Please permit me to quote from his comments.

Speaking to the General Assembly, he said: “. . . the Governor-elect will inherit a Commonwealth committed to sound financial management, to limited intrusion into the private lives of our citizens or the operation of local government, and to full citizenship for all Virginians, regardless of sex, race, age, creed or handicapped condition, but committed still to prompt and adequate response to the needs of Virginia and her people

Dalton’s career reminds us of a time when politics was not a blood sport

and to those qualities that make Virginia unique among the states.

For all of us who follow this calling, there are times when we feel called upon to be partisans of our party, but I have never felt that my own actions or comments were directed at any individual, or meant to cast personal aspersions, and I am certain that each of you has felt the same way.

My own farewell to you is touched with the sense of loss that comes to every retiring Governor, but also with the sense of fulfillment of having served to the best of my ability in the highest office the people of Virginia can bestow.

I shall sorely miss the associations I have had with so many members of this body, and the satisfaction of our joint endeavors on Virginia's behalf.

I will carry many warm memories with me, and I look forward to continuing many of our associations as I begin the next phase of my life by returning to the private sector.

And I express the sincere wish that a Benevolent Providence will be generous with his blessings on each of you, and continue to shower them on our beloved Commonwealth in years to come.

In the name of the people of Virginia I say to you: "Well done, good and faithful servants."

A Final Remembrance

In 1983—only one year after leaving office—John Dalton was diagnosed with lung cancer. What followed was a tragic series of events well known to all of us. He and his family fought hard, with great courage and with great dignity. He died on July 30, 1986.

John Dalton was buried on a graceful hill that overlooks green mountains, bluegrass meadows, and a river that flows to the sea. It is a beautiful spot where you can almost see forever and the thoughtful visitor cannot help but wonder—had John Dalton lived longer—what would have been the future of the family he loved, the party he helped build and the Commonwealth he served. Those are haunting questions impossible not to ask but, of course, equally impossible to answer.

Yet in remembering John Dalton, there is one enduring question that he posed in his first State of the Commonwealth Address. That question is ours to answer now—just as it was his to answer then. Speaking to the assembled leaders of the Commonwealth, he said, "I am sure you will agree with me that the indispensable yardstick to use to measure every proposal that comes before us is simply: Is it good for Virginia?"

In the life of John Dalton, we see the example of a leader who always sought to answer that question honestly and with honor.

May I suggest that those of us privileged now to lead would do well to remember that history will judge us by that same high standard. If we truly wish to serve the best interests of Virginia's people and to earn the respect and honor of future generations, we could do no better than remember the question John Dalton never forgot:

Is it good for Virginia? ●

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