

SPEECH BY:
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THE IMPORTANCE OF INFORMING THE PUBLIC

Two years ago the Institute of Government sponsored a conference for public relations officers of the various branches of State Government. I had not been Attorney General very long then, but Elmer Oettinger of the Institute nevertheless extended to me the privilege of talking with that group about the importance of informing the public.

I suppose he extended that invitation to me because he knew the philosophy I had used in seeking the position I now hold. As a candidate for Attorney General I had little money and certainly no political organization to call upon. My only hope of winning against an established incumbent was to take my message directly to the people and in short "inform the public" why I wanted to be Attorney General of North Carolina.

I accepted every invitation to speak which I possibly could. I traveled from one side of the State to the other in an attempt to communicate my ideas and thoughts concerning the Office of Attorney General to the people of this State. No one was more

aware at that point in my life than I of the importance of informing the public. I had to inform the public; I had to communicate with the individual voters of this State or I had no chance of unseating an incumbent and winning an election.

I believe we were successful in what we set out to do. And I believe that by availing ourselves of every possible forum and talking of positive programs in simple, everyday language, we were able to communicate to the people of North Carolina our program for revitalizing the Office of Attorney General and making it a moving force in the life of this State.

At any rate when the votes were counted we had a good margin of victory and the people had our promise to become the "People's Attorney" in every sense of the word. The people had our promise and, most of all, I think they understood what we had promised and how we intended to achieve it.

You can see, then, why I believe so strongly that public understanding of the structure and affairs of government is perhaps the single most important factor contributing to good government. I think you can understand, then, why I believe the people should know what is going on in Raleigh - what is being done and, just as important, what is not being done. You

can understand why I believe this because, in my opinion, public understanding was the key to my election as Attorney General; and, if I may be political for just a moment, I hope it will be the key to my re-election this fall.

It is perhaps trite to say, but I remind you that the public of our State is better educated and more enlightened today than it has ever been in the past. The public wants to know and the public demands to know - the public wants to make informed decisions. For this reason, no one can carry on the affairs of government in silence or in secrecy and remain in good stead, for both breed distrust and destroy public confidence.

I personally have never believed that the public expects public officials to be perfect and unerring. They expect those who serve them to make mistakes. But they also expect them when they err to err publicly, and equally important, to admit their errors. It is usually when mistakes are concealed or the truth is denied that the public becomes unforgiving and unwilling to continue to give their support. If you will think about this a moment, I believe you will agree with me that this is true.

I have said on many occasions that our actions as public officials must not only be fair and honest, they must be perceived by the public to be fair and honest. This is of utmost importance and requires a continuing effort to communicate. Communication is in fact a responsibility of any official and there is little excuse in this day for anyone's failing to do so.

It is obvious that in this State we have an aggressive press and a waiting and inquiring public. It takes little effort at all for one to take an idea or position to the people provided he has first formulated a definite position of his own and is willing to subject it to public scrutiny. And once they have the chance to examine and consider it, if the idea proposed or the action already taken has merit, the public usually will recognize it and support the official who reposes trust in them.

A good example is the "fireside chats" of FDR. Franklin Roosevelt went to the people to discuss with them the problems of the Nation. He spoke in words the people could understand; words that reawakened the spirit of America and brought unity to a troubled people. He went to the country not to "stump" but

rather to converse with his fellowmen - to communicate.
They responded with strong support for his New Deal
policies.

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You know I live with the fear that State
Government some day will become so vast in scale, so
crowded and so remote that it will become inaccessible
to the individual citizen and thus totally ineffective.
This disturbs me as your Attorney General and I have
tried to guard against its happening in my own agency.

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All of State Government should do the same
thing, I think. One good way to do this is through
direct citizen participation in affairs of the State.
And there is no better way than through service by
private citizens on the many State Boards and
Commissions which serve in primarily advisory capacities
to the agencies of State Government.

There has been some talk that in order to economize and streamline government under planned reorganization, we must eliminate many of these Commissions and Boards. Perhaps there is some merit to this suggestion. However, I think that before we move too far in this new direction, we should weigh very carefully the benefit State Government derives from this form of citizen participation.

Our people must feel they have some direct input into the business of government and our people must in fact have direct input. We cannot remove government from them, place it exclusively in the hands of State-level bureaucrats and expect to maintain the interest and support of the people. We cannot remove government from them and expect government and the governed to operate as one body rather than as two bodies, each suspicious of the other.

Participatory government, open government, invites enlightened politics. Thomas Jefferson voiced this belief when he stated, "No one more sincerely wishes the spread of information among mankind than I do, and none has greater confidence in its effect towards supporting free and good government."

Other early leaders also were convinced that the business of government must be publicized. They believed that the survival of the new Nation depended upon the people being kept informed and so do I.

Madison, the father of the Constitution wrote: "Knowledge will forever govern ignorance. And a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives. A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce, or a tragedy, or perhaps both." Clearly, the founders of our Nation considered informing the people to be a function of democracy.

Especially after the last turbulent decade, dissatisfaction with the government has grown among the people. We have seen crisis follow crisis - both domestic and foreign - and popular interest in the affairs of government has continued to grow. Thus it is no longer a matter of choice whether we will inform the people; it is a matter of necessity. Our people will not tolerate it and it is good, in my opinion, that they will not.

We have seen excesses in attempts to inform the public of the processes of decision-making, especially at the national level. Under certain circumstances, such extreme tactics violate existing laws and national security. Therefore, I do not condone them. But these excesses should tell us something.

They should tell us that the public wants to know not only what decisions are being made, but the processes by which they are made. The public wants to know if there is dissent in high counsels and what alternatives are being rejected. The public wants to decide for itself whether we are reaching the correct conclusions in government decision-making at every level and as far as reasonably possible those of us in government should see that they have this right.

There is a popular notion in some government circles that we should inform the people so long as the information we are giving them is non-controversial. This is a dangerous approach to "informing the public" because it necessitates someone's making a choice as to what the public should know. I think you can see the inherent flaw in this philosophy as well as I.

There are others who take the attitude that there is little need to try to inform the public about issues because in their opinion the public could not understand anyway. They want the voters to take them on faith without questioning their judgment or ability.

I am particularly sensitive to this kind of attitude because, as Attorney General, I have been told the same thing on occasion when I have made inquiries on behalf of the consuming public. Mr. Benoy and I were told by some that utility and insurance rate making were too complicated for us to understand, but we discovered that what was going on was completely understandable.

We were told that the milk industry was too complicated to understand, but I believe that at last we also have figured it out. I realize, of course, that some may dispute this and I know there are some persons in both industries who wish they had been right when they gave us this warning.

What I have discovered is that when someone tells you that what he is doing is too complicated to explain or too complicated for you to understand, you had better try to understand.

To sum up, I don't believe there is any function of State Government that the voters of this State are not capable of comprehending. And if anyone uses this reasoning as an excuse not to communicate with and inform the public then he is avoiding a very real responsibility to the public and possibly does not deserve their trust and confidence.

To be quite candid I am afraid that to the average person, government does seem remote. Consequently, it often becomes a scapegoat to blame for all sorts of things and frequently the people consider it a force beyond their control which holds complete sway over the destiny of the Nation and themselves. They feel no sense of partnership with government and the concept that government is of the people, for the people, and especially, by the people often seems lost. Because they do not understand government, they tend to harbor an inherent distrust of government and sometimes for good reason.

With the extended growth in the credibility problem some years ago, former President Dwight D. Eisenhower acknowledged: "In the diplomatic field it was routine practice to deny responsibility for an embarrassing occurrence when there was even one percent chance of being believed, but when the world

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can entertain not the slightest doubt of the facts there is no point in trying to evade the issue."

Eisenhower could not forget the discovery of the United States U-2 spy plane deep inside Russia. The Russians smugly kept silent about the capture and confession of pilot Francis Gary Powers until after the United States government had released a contrived story stating the plane was on a weather reconnaissance flight for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. "The big error we made was, of course, in the issuance of a premature and erroneous cover story," Eisenhower reflected. "Allowing myself to be persuaded on this score is my principal regret - except for the U-2 failure itself - regarding the whole affair."

Credibility in governmental programs is the first essential, and it cannot be achieved by falsehood and hypocrisy which usually are and should be promptly exposed. As I said earlier, the public is willing to forgive errors by public officials, but is slow to

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forgive an attempt to conceal an error.

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When I addressed this subject some two years ago, I noted that a poll made by one Congressman showed that 86 percent of the people who were asked the question, "Do you believe that the government gives the people reliable information on what is going on," responded, "No!" Of course I have no way of knowing what the percentage would be today, but I believe

Without doubt, access to information about the government is required for the democratic system to work successfully. In order to maintain a government run by an informed people, secrecy must be minimized and the flow of accurate facts maximized.

A government whose leaders cannot be believed runs the risk of losing the privilege of representing the people, and the people risk losing the contest between democracy and despotism. In a democracy, it is essential that the people possess and exercise the right to criticize the actions of the government. Criticism, if it is to serve a valid purpose in a free society must be based upon complete understanding of the facts and, as public officials, we must see that these facts are available to the people.

In a 1960 report of the President's Commission on National Goals, the report concluded: "Improvement of the democratic process requires a constantly better informed public ... What America needs is not more voters, but more good voters, men and women who are informed, understanding and reasonable. To produce such men and women in ever larger numbers should be a major goal of all labors to preserve American democracy."

I agree and this election year is a good time to renew our dedication to achieving this goal. We who serve will be better servants for it, and those whom we serve will be more able to assist us with their suggestions, ideas, criticism and support. Consequently, they will receive greater service from their government.

I know that it is to my advantage as a public officeholder to help create an informed public and for selfish reasons, if for none other, I intend to continue my efforts to do so. In turn, it is to your advantage as citizens and voters of this State to make sure we do not ignore this responsibility.