

WILL WE TAX OURSELVES TO FIGHT TRAFFIC CONGESTION AND AIR POLLUTION?

By William Nicoson

*“A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin
of little minds, adored by little statesmen...
With consistency a great soul has simply
nothing to do.”* Ralph Waldo Emerson,
Self-Reliance

Political and environmental statesmen prize consistency. To be inconsistent is an admission that a prior position embraced by the statesman was in error. That is anathema, except to the very few statesmen possessing “a great soul.” I interpret Emerson’s “great soul” to imply a willingness to take personal risks in serving the public interest which is now viewed by the statesman in a fresh light.

I’ve always respected State Senator Richard L. Saslaw (D-Fairfax) and our own State Senator Janet Howell (D-Reston), both of whom serve on the Senate Finance Committee. They were right to insist that Northern Virginia needs far more funding for education and transportation than state and county budgets are likely to provide. They were right to support a referendum in Northern Virginia on an increase in sales tax revenues dedicated to education and transportation improvements. They were wrong in two past years to reject a referendum limited to funding of only transportation improvements. This year they were right at last to accept such a referendum.

Of course Saslaw and Howell in past years were no more stubborn in pursuit of the whole loaf or nothing than S. Vance Wilkins, Jr. (R-Amherst), speaker of the House of Delegates, whose consistent opposition to greater education funding in Northern Virginia reflects his view that economic growth of down-state jurisdictions would be impaired by greater disparity in educational opportunities between north and south.

The General Assembly at its recent session passed and sent to Governor Mark R. Warner (D) for signature a bill authorizing a referendum on a sales tax increase for transportation needs in Hampton Roads. The Governor sought amendment of that bill at an April 17 session to incorporate authorization of a Northern Virginia referendum on increased sales taxes to fund transportation projects. When Saslaw and Howell abandoned consistency to support the Governor’s amendment, it passed easily.

In doing so they proved that, even in the Richmond General Assembly, there are legislators with what Emerson called “a great soul.”

It has to be noted that in past years Governor James E. Gilmore (R), unlike Governor Warner, offered no assurance of future support for increased benefits for education and indeed no

assurance that he would even sign a bill offering the possibility of increased taxes. A change of administration in these circumstances was ample justification for rejecting the “hobgoblin” of consistency.

Uncertainty remains, however, whether Northern Virginia voters in November will approve a one-half cent increase in the sales tax to increase public spending on transportation projects that combat highway congestion and air pollution. Some environmentalists have warned that many of the road projects listed in the legislation will induce sprawl and have promised that their opposition will defeat the referendum.

But any reasonable analysis of bond amounts authorized in the referendum legislation must conclude that funds for projects in outlying areas which might induce sprawl are dwarfed by funds for transit and for road improvements in areas already highly developed. My own analysis concludes that, of the total \$2.8 billion in bonding authority, only \$650 million, or 23%, might contribute to new, low-density development while the entire \$2.8 billion will contribute to less traffic congestion and consequently cleaner air in Northern Virginia.

Under these circumstances, environmentalists who fight against referendum approval are unworthy of their profession. But having taken their stand, they are likely to embrace Emerson’s “hobgoblin” of consistency. I hope they prove me wrong.

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