For release February 6, 2002   Draft of Jan. 30, 2002

LOWER TAXES! BETTER TEACHERS!

By William Nicoson

"Good jobs begin with good schools...
a quality teacher in every classroom."
President George W. Bush,
State of the Union, Jan. 29, 2002

Since the creation of government, the people governed have always sought to pay less in taxes for more in public services. And those democratically elected as governors of the people have sought to give the people what they wanted in order to be reelected. It takes a hero among statesmen to identify a principal service demanded by the people – say, education; then reason that better teachers will improve education, and better salaries will bring better teachers; concluding that the people should pay more taxes to government in order that government may pay higher salaries to teachers.

Governor Mark Warner had his chance to prove himself such a hero. During his political campaign to become Virginia's Governor, candidate Warner sounded the heroic educational theme. He promised to raise teachers' salaries.

After all, the annual salaries of Virginia teachers are about $3,000 below the national average. Virginia ranks 25th of all the 50 states and the District of Columbia in size of teachers' salaries. At the same time, Virginians rank 14th in the size of personal income.

The competition for superior teachers, particularly in Northern Virginia, is not served by the fact that the average annual salary of Maryland teachers exceeds that of Virginia teachers by $5,000. Even Southern Virginia suffers by comparison with higher salaries paid to teachers in North Carolina.

Despite these depressing statistics reported by the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission of the Virginia General Assembly and despite his campaign promises, Governor Warner has announced that budget constraints preclude raising the salaries of teachers in Virginia at the present time.

A chief budget constraint is, of course, that former Governor Gilmore proposed, and the General Assembly adopted, a phase-out of the car tax. Thirty percent of car tax revenues have disappeared, and Governor Warner's budget "freezes" further car tax reduction. But that's just not good enough to salvage the quality of public education in the Commonwealth.

Elimination of the car tax without any other compensating revenue was a catastrophic blow to Virginia's obligation to maintain and improve the quality of its services to citizens. But it appeared to have such political appeal that legislators of both parties embraced it.

Now that the devastating budget constraints of car tax repeal have been revealed, Governor Warner had an opportunity to seek restoration of the tax in order to meet pressing local needs, not the least of which is in the schools. It's true that the needed revenue increase might not have been realized since both the Senate and House of Delegates would have had to approve reinstatement of all or most of the car tax reduction. Many legislators of both parties might have found that distasteful political medicine.

Rather than taking the initiative himself to seek increased personal property taxes for education from the General Assembly, the Governor has called instead for a state-wide referendum on increased sales taxes to fund education. This is the classic cop-out of a timorous official facing a politically hazardous decision: pass the buck back to the voters. Governors are elected to make the hard decisions that balance revenues and services. In his first month in office, Governor Warner has demonstrated the limits of his fortitude.

The decision to go along with opposition legislators rather than fulfill a promise to constituents of enormous value in the public interest may or may not serve the Governor's future legislative agenda and political aspirations. But heroic it is not, just at a time when Virginia needs heros as never before to improve the quality of educational opportunities today in order to assure the quality of economic and cultural opportunities for Virginians tomorrow.

William Nicoson has spent a lot of time in classrooms, both as student and teacher.