



2011 Legislative Session A Far Cry from the Golden Era

It's Up to the People to Force Change

By Dr. Nelson Easterling

***Chair's
Perspective
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The 2011 Legislative session is over. As a citizen and an outside observer, I can only say that it may have been the worst I have witnessed. The negative effects have the potential of creating a disaster for this state of epic proportions.

Many questions were created by this session. The primary question I think we need to address is how it was allowed to happen. Sure, we know that money had a lot to do with the elections of last fall. And we know that the same money has had enormous influence over the issues and votes. It is easy to blame the politicians and the special interests. But what of our responsibility? What were we doing? What could we have done better?

More importantly, what were the huge majorities of people doing who now say they have no respect for the state political leadership? Has the electorate become so jaded they do not think anything can be done? Have the majority of Floridians given up hope? Or, worse yet, have they fallen prey to the cascade of clichés and false pronouncements?

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All too often in the last few years I have heard the cliché that taxes are inadequate to fund the basic functions of government, but they cannot be raised during a time of economic weakness. This edict generally comes from those who continue to provide tax cuts to the wealthiest and to corporations.

Does anyone remember when there was a political movement to ask the question “What would Reagan do?” in times of difficulty? I do. I cannot answer that hypothetical question, but I can tell you what Reagan ACTUALLY DID when the nation faced a problem of employment difficulties.

It was 1981. Reagan had just rammed through Congress a massive tax cut, primarily for the rich. Revenues began to plummet. Employment figures began to drop. We entered a recession. What was Reagan's solution? Tax increases!!! And it worked. Employment figures stabilized and then began to rebound. For the remainder of his administration employment continued to grow. Now supporters hail him for cutting taxes and creating jobs. Both are true, but the implied relationship is flawed. In reality, he raised taxes and created jobs.

So, why don't those who purport to follow the Reagan philosophy follow suit? Perhaps it is because they do not know the truth! Perhaps the truth and empirical facts are not as important to them as they should be.

There was a time in the Florida Legislature that was hailed as a Golden Era by researchers. It was a time when members cared enough about their oaths of office to seek information in order to achieve

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constitutional goals. And there was enough institutional memory to assist them in that quest. Apparently that era has been replaced with one exemplified by reliance on false memories and misleading platitudes.

Recent polls show that Floridians have little respect for current political leaders. That seems appropriate since current political leaders have demonstrated a lack to respect for the people of the state.

Unfortunately, this mutual distrust and dislike cannot solve our problems. It only exacerbates the problems and bodes nothing but ill for our shared future.

Those who understand the past must join forces to restore a respect for the people who actually create the social and economic wealth of our communities, the wage earners, the parents, the broad array of middle and working class society. They are the foundation upon which this country was built. They are the only hope for the future. In the final analysis, without their support only the elites will have a voice. And we have seen where they will lead.

Dr. Nelson Easterling, Chair of the Florida Center on Fiscal and Economic Policy, is a former senior staff member for the Florida Senate. He earned his doctorate in public policy and economics from Florida State University and has taught graduate courses there.