

Creating Effective Coalition Meetings: The Purpose and Status of the Virginia Coalition Meeting

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For a number of years a question has been raised in policy circles regarding how classical liberal/conservative scholars could have won the intellectual debate regarding free markets, limited government, and the rule of law, without the effect of those victories ever sifting down to the level of public policy. Statism is dead. Statists are alive and well.

In his 1999 book, *Intellectual Pilgrims*, Ed Feulner, president of The Heritage Foundation, wrote:

“Like many classical liberals, I used to think that politics in the narrow sense was merely a function of politics in the larger sense: Once the intellectual battle was over, and the common good was rightly understood, political candidates with wrong ideas would find it impossible to get (re)elected, and politicians with the right ideas would be swept into office, where they would proceed to dismantle the welfare state and reaffirm the traditional classical liberal principles of limited government and liberty under the law.

“In my view, recent events demonstrate conclusively that this understanding of the relationship between politics in the large and narrow senses is flawed. We have won the battle of ideas. ... Yet big government continues to grow ever bigger.

Feulner asked, “How can it be that in democratic societies based on majority rule, the barriers to free markets and free people are still largely intact?”

He provided two answers. First, according to public choice theory, there exists an “Iron Triangle” of bureaucrats, politicians, and special interests whose employment, wealth, prestige, and power are dependent upon preserving the status quo. Second, there exists a difference in attitude between the founding generation and contemporary Americans in regards to the citizenry. Feulner wrote:

“As I already noted, the Founders had a burning faith in the ability of ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things once they were freed from the fetters of big government. But modern Americans who grew up in a welfare state and became accustomed to delegating so many of life’s tasks to a gigantic bureaucracy, simply aren’t sure that they can take up the slack on their own. ... Who, in short, would serve as his brother’s keeper – if not Big Brother himself?

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I founded the Virginia Institute for Public Policy in September, 1996. One cannot be in public policy for long before one realizes two fundamental truths. First, no matter how scholarly your research, ultimately there must be a political solution. Second, those in political office always have the option of ignoring your policy recommendations and will frequently do so because it is not typically in their self-interest to limit the role and cost of government. In the current environment in Virginia, the state government is little more than a financial intermediary between people who produce wealth (the citizenry), and those who want access to that wealth (the large donors to political campaigns).

By the summer of 2001, frustration was building at the Institute. After four years of a Republican governor, a Republican-controlled House of Delegates, and a Republican-controlled Senate, state spending was soaring. It was becoming increasingly clear that special interests would always ensure that the party in power becomes the primary advocate for more spending and more government. The possibility of the Institute being an instrument to effect change in a positive direction seemed small.

However, in the fall of 2001, I attended a State Policy Network conference in Colorado. At that meeting it was announced that grants were available to start coalition meetings in the states. As soon as I heard this, I realized that a coalition could be **an end run** around the “Iron Triangle” in Virginia. By organizing the grassroots, we would not have to depend on politicians to “do the right thing.” We would not have to present our policy proposals to politicians and then hope they would vote against their own self-interests. A coalition would serve as a statewide distribution network for the Virginia Institute’s policy recommendations.

In December 2001, the Institute hosted its first monthly coalition meeting in Richmond. Eleven months later, fourteen taxpayers’ associations, which had begun to work together as a result of participating in the coalition, were instrumental in the defeat of two regional sales tax referendums despite being outspent forty-to-one by the special interests that were going to be the beneficiaries of the revenue generated by the proposed sales taxes.

In retrospect, that effort was successful for two reasons. The grassroots could go to the polls (it was a referendum), and the taxpayers’ groups took the opposition by surprise.

In the 2004 session of the Virginia General Assembly, we were not successful. Democrat Governor Mark Warner was joined by the Democrats and moderate Republicans in the legislature in passing the largest tax increase in the history of Virginia. Though the individual members of the coalition strove mightily to educate both the public and the legislators as to what was at stake in this budget battle, we lost and, once again, I would say it was for two reasons. Because this was not a referendum, the grassroots could not go to the polls. We had to rely on the politicians. Second, due to our success in defeating the two regional sales tax referendums, we were not going to take our opposition by surprise again.

One positive from the legislative session: we were able to identify a weakness in the coalition. Approximately forty percent of the members of the coalition are located in northern Virginia with another forty percent in the Tidewater. That leaves twenty percent to cover the greater part of Virginia. Politicians in the Shenandoah Valley are not really affected by telephone calls and e-mails from Norfolk or Alexandria. In an effort to correct this imbalance in the coalition's distribution, we are today finding volunteers to serve as congressional district chairs and House of Delegate district chairs. This is not for the purpose of supporting candidates or political parties, as we find neither to be reliable. These individuals promote low taxes, limited government, and private property in the communities in which they live.

As mentioned earlier, to effect change there ultimately must be a political solution. This will not be attained, however, by generating policy studies that can be easily ignored or by supporting candidates who are members of this or that party. If the grassroots begins to understand that enormous resources have been wasted during the past seventy years as we waited for the promises of the statist to materialize, and if the people will regain their self-reliance, we can return to a commonwealth of free markets and free people that Mr. Jefferson and Mr. Madison would recognize.

Ed Feulner ended *Intellectual Pilgrims* with the following:

“We need to convince our fellow citizens that the tasks the public sector performs so poorly today could be performed far better by the private sector tomorrow. We need to demonstrate that there are more compassionate ways of helping the poor; more enlightened ways of protecting the environment; more effective ways of educating our children, healing our sick, and tending to our elderly than to rely on the “invisible foot” of a distant bureaucracy.”

When ordinary citizens make up their minds that they have had enough and then begin to coalesce around a new set of ideas or an old set of principles, the tyranny of the status quo will be finished and the Iron Triangle routed.