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Cook on Concord

Divergent views from Sununu and Buckley

Friday, October 09, 2009

The chairs of the state Democratic and Republican parties recently addressed business leaders on the New Hampshire economy, government and politics. What Republican John H. Sununu and Democrat Raymond Buckley said painted very different pictures of the state and its economic and political future.

Sununu, former governor, Ph.D. and inventor/entrepreneur painted the picture of a state, once "great," now just "good," where individual participation in government, initiative, local control and limited government and taxation have been replaced.

Sununu said that we had a great thing going for business with no sales or income tax and limited taxation, and the fact that during the last legislative session business was saddled only with one new tax (on LLCs) should not make the business community complacent or grateful. He urged businesses to resist supporting budgets such as the last one produced by the Democratic Legislature and signed by Governor Lynch.

Sununu pointed to the precarious circumstances of the retirement system, with an unfunded liability of \$3.4 billion, plus health care and other unfunded post-employment promises, as being a \$7 billion problem for the state, 35 to 40 percent of which will be the responsibility of cities and towns.

On the state budget, Sununu indicated that this year most states cut budget spending by 2.4 percent, and our budget went up 6 percent on top of a 17 percent increase previously.

He indicated that the next budget starts \$500 million to \$600 dollars short, which is a large percentage of the budget.

Sununu said that cutting state employees is not the answer, as programs and entitlements make up the vast majority of state spending and that is where savings can be obtained.

On education, Sununu said Lynch was late to the table in calling for a constitutional amendment and then did not push for it hard enough. He said we lost what was great about New Hampshire education when the state took over responsibility.

Sununu said that the state has been targeted by the national Democratic Party for an infusion of dollars, and that has resulted in an unfair advantage for the Democrats in election campaigns and in pushing social issues that are inappropriate for New Hampshire. Nevertheless, Sununu predicted that, with a change in attitudes among voters coming in the 2010

elections, New Hampshire would elect a Republican governor, Republican Congress members and a Republican to replace Judd Gregg in the U.S. Senate.

By comparison, Democratic Party chief Raymond Buckley reviewed the progress of the Democratic Party in the last 50 years in New Hampshire, going from a virtually non-existent force, with the possible exception of a few officeholders, to the "majority" party in the state. He cited polls of voter attitude that promise to reinforce and solidify Democratic control.

On the economy, Buckley noted that, in facing the worst economic times since the Great Depression, the Democratic administration Legislature in Concord have handled the situation well, effected a 3 percent real reduction in state spending, made government more efficient, closed courts and froze state jobs.

Buckley predicted that an income tax is not coming, nor is a sales tax and, in fact, when an income tax did pass in 1999, it was sponsored by a Republican member of the House, but did not become law.

Buckley said that under Democratic leadership, the Legislature passed a responsible budget and the Republican alternative would have pushed spending down on the cities and towns.

Buckley cited recently passed legislation he believed that was good for health care, and indicated that the business community and its goals are shared by the Democratic Legislature and governor. He said the business community should have no hesitation in contacting him or Democratic legislators to express opinions and urge action.

On the future of the state and politics, Buckley was optimistic about his party's chances, since it has more registrants than any other (adding that a majority of independents identify themselves as Democratic voters when they go to the ballot box). He predicted that in the next election cycle, Democrats would pick up Gregg's seat and retain the two congressional seats, the governorship and control of both houses of the Legislature.

It was as if these two knowledgeable observers were describing two different places. Only time will tell which, if either, vision is correct or whether the future will be a blend of the two visions.

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