



Bradford E. Cook
Direct dial: 603.627.8110
Fax: 603.641.2343
bcook@sheehan.com

Cook on Concord

Judd Gregg will be missed

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Only one person in New Hampshire history has occupied the offices of executive councilor, congressman, governor and U.S. senator. Judd Gregg not only did that, he did it in a continuous succession of offices beginning in 1979.

Gregg, who has indicated his intention to retire from the Senate in January 2011 after three terms, spoke recently at a breakfast in Bedford sponsored by the New England Council, a region-wide business organization headquartered in Boston.

Gregg addressed an audience of about 100 people. His presentation reminded them all, Republicans, Democrats and independents alike, why he has been a significant office-holder and how much he will be missed.

Gregg, a noted budget hawk, is the ranking Republican member on the Senate Budget Committee. He presented a chart that showed federal taxes and spending as a percentage of the gross domestic product. It showed that taxes are well below the average of 18 percent of GDP since 1960, while spending, which has averaged 20 percent of GDP, is now close to 26 percent.

While the federal stimulus may have been necessary as a one-time measure to help fix the economy, Gregg reported, the problem with the Obama 2011 budget is that it forecasts spending at a level that is much higher than the historic average. Taxes will not equal spending at any future point, resulting in continued deficits, larger debt and that, in turn, will result in debt being a huge percentage of GDP over time.

More troublesome is the projection that by 2020 debt held by the public will be more than seventy-five percent of the GDP and the interest on the debt will be a huge and unaffordable portion of the federal budget, requiring future citizens to reduce their standard of living, other countries regarding us as a bankrupt or debtor nation and foreign governments putting us on a credit watch.

He warned that there will be a crisis of confidence in our government if something is not done about the budget.

Gregg did all this without rancor or hyperbole. He led the audience through these matters in an educated and professorial manner which left everyone impressed not only with the message, but also with the senator's knowledge of budget matters.

End of an era

On the question of health care, another subject on which Gregg is knowledgeable and in which he has been a major player in Washington, he reported that he had sent suggestions to President Obama that the White House may be taking seriously, that everyone go back to square one and list all of the measures that Republicans and Democrats support in common which, he reported, are substantial - namely, coverage for almost all if not all Americans and a reduction in the cost of health care.

In answer to questions, Gregg reported that there still is bipartisanship and collegiality in the Senate, notwithstanding recent concerns about that, although he indicated that Republican and Democratic leadership take much more extreme positions and, in the age of 24-hour news programs, need to use extreme rhetoric to attract attention - a trend he decried.

He noted the announcement by Sen. Evan Bayh of Indiana that he would not seek a third term in the Senate because of the lack of cooperation and civility with sympathy and understanding.

In answer to another question, Gregg reported that it was his prediction that the federal estate tax would be renewed either at the \$3.5 million exemption and 45 percent maximum rate that was in effect through 2009, or at the \$5 million exemption and 35 percent rate some have suggested, and that he personally favors.

Many in attendance at the breakfast said privately what one questioner posed publicly, "What is it we can do, senator, to get you to change your mind and run for another term in the United States Senate?"

Gregg, with typical good humor and modesty, thanked the questioner, but indicated that he and his wife had other things to do in their lives without ignoring the needs of the people of New Hampshire or the necessity of being in public office.

That answer certainly was understandable to an audience who, this observer believes, were nearly unanimous in their opinion that the result would be too bad for New Hampshire while probably good for Judd and Kathy Gregg.

As the Gregg era comes to an end, people are realizing more and more the contributions of this good New Hampshire citizen who, many have observed, performed better in each office than he had in the one before and has made a significant contribution to his state and his nation.

Well done, Senator Gregg, and thank you!

Brad Cook is a shareholder in the Manchester law firm of Sheehan Phinney Bass + Green and heads its government relations and estate planning groups. He also serves as secretary of the Business and Industry Association of New Hampshire.