

A few flips shy of a flop

The Sun 2/25/96
By BARRY RASCOVAR

NOTE TO Parris Glendening: It's time to take advice from an American icon about presenting a clear message to constituents. "If you once forfeit the confidence of your fellow citizens, you can never regain their respect and esteem. It is true that you may fool all the people some of the time; you can even fool some of the people all the time; but you can't fool all the people all the time."

A fuzzy message — appearing to try to fool all the people all the time — seems to be part of the governor's problem. He wants to be all things to all people. Like Bill Clinton, he is eager for all groups to like him (and give him campaign support). But sending out conflicting signals ultimately turns counter-productive.

So far this legislative session, the governor has gone in two directions on personnel reform, on environmental regulations, on prison policies and on port dredging. He says he likes to bring opposing sides together under a "big tent" to reach compromise. More often than not, it comes out looking like appeasement.

Take personnel matters. While pursuing reforms to make the state work force more incentive-driven and easier to manage, Mr. Glendening is also pushing a collective-bargaining plan that includes binding arbitration. The two don't mesh. Efficiency gained through reforms would be lost under a raft of inflexible work rules bargained away — or awarded by an arbitrator. Any savings from reforms vanish into almost certain wage and benefit hikes each year.

Mouth here, money there

On prison policy, the governor preaches a get-tough approach. But his "truth in sentencing" bill actually would mean shorter and less restrictive sentences for most lawbreakers. He calls for harsher treatment of hardened criminals, but he has stripped nearly all money from his budget for prison construction. And while his lieutenant governor crusades for alternatives to incarceration,

there's no money for new alternative programs in the administration's budget.

The same duality crops up in regulatory reform. The governor wants to please the business community, but also the environmentalists. Thus, he has gone halfway on lifting regulations that impede businesses. So business leaders grumble that the governor's moves don't go far enough, and environmentalists complain that he is giving away too much.

The same straddle can be seen on harbor-dredging. Maryland needs a long-term solution for disposing of material dredged from the bay's shipping channels. Delays could damage the state's maritime economy. And yet the governor rejected a carefully crafted compromise worked out over several years by state officials, bay scientists and port leaders because environmentalists objected to experimental dumping of spoils in the deepest part of the bay. That move cheered environmentalists but dismayed the port community. The apparent waffling could produce continued gridlock on the critical dredging question.

The same thing could happen on prisons and personnel reform. The governor has fuzzed his message and given lawmakers the impression he has no clear vision.

But, as Abraham Lincoln said over a century ago, you can't fool all the people all the time. Mr. Glendening comes off as weak and hypocritical. Lawmakers see through the charade. They have little confidence in this administration. Because there is no statement of the governor's real priorities, legislators assume his agenda is merely political — to assuage as many groups as possible.

Given that unfocused direction, lawmakers have little incentive to reconcile the governor's divergent approaches, or to side with one group over another. That is tough, thankless work. Unless the governor takes strong stands, why should legislators?

Mr. Glendening is not popular with the public. A recent poll showed his favorable rating at just 32 percent. His efforts to build two new football stadiums, while of long-term importance, aren't yet viewed positively by most voters.

To regain public confidence, he needs to chart a firm course with clear goals and objectives that Marylanders applaud. So far, that hasn't happened. Mr. Glendening has muddled his message. He has, indeed, tried too often to be all things to all people.

State treasurer balances new post and old politics

Prince George's Journal
By SUE FERNANDEZ 2/21/96
Capital News Service

ANNAPOLIS — Sitting in the plush state treasurer's office, Richard N. Dixon pulls out a copy of the latest bond sale book, turns to the title page and points to his name.

"Look, that's me," he says, eyes beaming. "It's kind of exciting to see your name in print like that."

"And now my name will be on every check the state sends out."

Dixon, 57, elected state treasurer last month after 13 years in the House of Delegates, can hardly contain himself.

The "country boy" who grew up on Charles Street, a poor black area of rural Westminster, now occupies the highest state office ever held by someone from Carroll County — no small feat for a black Democrat in a conservative district that's 97 percent white.

Remembering his roots brought him to where he is.

"It's a matter of living and growing up in the country," Dixon says. "I never had to take any polls to find out what's important to people. There are a number of general stores you can go into any evening and figure out what's going on."

His neighbors want criminals to serve their full sentences, government to stay out of their lives, low taxes, and their delegate "never to bring up gun control."

Dixon's record reflects their wishes. Last session, he was the only Democrat supporting a Republican income tax cut, and he's always pushed for tough crime legislation, including proposals to abolish the parole system.

"I'm a Republican, but I've always voted for him because he's a good man, an honest man," says Ida Myers, 73, owner of Myers' Grocery on Westminster's Main Street, who has known Dixon since he was a boy.

Dixon was born in 1938, the sixth generation of his family to grow up in Carroll. The area was even more rural then: "You could not have hogs today in the places they had hogs back then," he says.

It was also more segregated, with "separate drinking fountains and a balcony for blacks in the movies, so you were aware you were black."

Even so, the Dixon family was well-respected.

Dixon's father, Thomas, was a bus driver, projectionist at the local movie theater and a custodian. At the county library, where he

Cont.

cont.

spent years as janitor, a room bears his name and his portrait on a wall.

Dixon's mother, Mamie, helped start the Robert Moton School for black children, which Dixon attended from seventh grade through high school. She was PTA president and volunteered for the Union Street First United Methodist Church, where Dixon still worships.

Dixon registered as a Democrat at age 18 because he admired Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry Truman.

"They were strong leaders who took risks," he says, "and Truman came from humble beginnings. They were people who believed in democracy."

Staying a Democrat kept him effective in a majority-Democrat state: "I wouldn't be treasurer today if I weren't a Democrat. And I wouldn't have been able to get so much legislation passed for my county."

While his constituents swear by him, others feel betrayed by him.

Dixon never joined the Legislature's Black Caucus, and last session didn't vote for a bill to increase the minority share of state contracts.

"My constituents were against it," he said. "I represent my constituents

first. Most of my colleagues don't understand that."

Nor does the state NAACP, which endorsed Pauline H. Menes, a white liberal Prince George's County Democrat, for treasurer. Hanley J. Norment, the group's president, calls Dixon "Maryland's own Clarence Thomas" and says Dixon is too focused on re-election.

"Dixon has a record of being frightened like a rabbit," Norment said.

Norment worries Dixon's attitude will hurt minorities, given that as treasurer he'll have a say in state contracts. But Dixon has told the NAACP that the larger constituency he now represents includes minorities, and promises to be more visible in the minority community.

As treasurer, Dixon represents the Legislature on the three-member Board of Public Works, with the governor and comptroller. He also invests the state's money, drawing on his 26 years as a Merrill Lynch stockbroker and experience on the House Appropriations Committee.

Dixon holds bachelor's and master's degrees from the former Morgan State College. He is an Army veteran, with a year's service in

Vietnam, where earned a Bronze Star and saw his life's outlook change.

"Things do not bother me anymore," he says. "I don't get upset about administrative problems."

He drives a Corvette and is known to wear a full-length mink and enjoy a cigar. His office radio stays tuned to jazz station WEA-Morgan State. He and his wife of 36 years, Grayson, take at least five vacations a year. They have two grown sons and a 7-year-old granddaughter.

"I believe in enjoying life," Dixon says. "You only go around once."