



The Ebb and Flow of Change in American Government

Earl Ray Tomblin, President
West Virginia State Senate

Earl Ray Tomblin was elected to the West Virginia House of Delegates for three consecutive terms beginning in 1974, and seven consecutive terms in the State Senate, beginning in 1980. Mr. Tomblin served as chairman of the Committee on Confirmations, Senate Majority Whip, chairman of the Energy, Industry and Mining Committee and Finance chairman before being elected the 48th President of the Senate in January 1995. He is the longest serving Senate President in West Virginia's history.

Mr. Tomblin was born in Logan County, West Virginia, and received his undergraduate degree from West Virginia University and an MBA from Marshall University.

In 2004 he was elected vice-president of the National Council of State Governments (CSG), the umbrella organization for the Southern Governors Association and became chairman in December 2005. Mr. Tomblin is the first West Virginian ever selected on this leadership track.

As far back as I can remember, politicians have been intoning the idea of change. I cannot imagine any candidate running for any political office on a platform of "let's keep things the way they are." Maybe the closest we came to that was the re-election cry of Woodrow Wilson supporters during the 1916 election, who urged "vote for Wilson, he kept us out of war." Of course, not long after winning his second term, the United States was in the middle of World War I. The development of the country, its social order and politics have been changing since.

Change occurs on all levels of government and in every one of life's arenas. It is important to recognize its ebb and flow and be prepared for whatever the change brings. Strong leadership is often a necessity in addressing the effects of change – or the prospect of changes to come. Dealing with change may require tough decisions from those who lead. Sometimes these decisions are so complicated, earth shaking and unpopular that the public does not understand the reasoning behind the actions taken.

Individuals also can challenge all of us to be willing to take a chance on change. Such was the case in the 1960 presidential primary election campaign in West Virginia, when Senator John F. Kennedy asked voters to set aside their Protestant leanings and support a Roman Catholic for the White House. Kennedy won because he convinced voters that under his leadership the climate of our nation's government would be much different than the Eisenhower-Nixon years and that it was time to lay aside old fears. In a stunning victory, West Virginians led the movement of change by tearing down the barriers of prejudice and demonstrating a Catholic could win the White House.

Winston Churchill said history, or hindsight, is 20/20, and a great leader must be a visionary – able to look beyond the political horizon in

order to prepare both the electorate and the government for the coming change, even in the face of criticism. Another historic example is President Franklin D. Roosevelt's conviction that the United States would be unable to avoid World War II, which resulted in his decision to prepare the country for it through the Lend-Lease Act. Roosevelt saw change coming in the winds of war, and he took decisive and controversial action, even while isolationist detractors scathed him for his intervention. As history records, his instincts were correct and the isolationists were wrong. He was able to anticipate the dramatic change in world events which he believed ultimately would bring the war to the United States, and his preemptive work helped stave off defeat of Great Britain and the Soviet Union until the United States became a full-fledged ally.





While the world war is an example of drastic national change, the changes in economics, in social, cultural and moral values and attitudes also have impacted West Virginia's politics since the war ended. State priorities and the wants and wishes of the electorate continue to have a profound effect on all aspects of state and local politics and government. Today's headlines, trumpeting the latest earth shattering event, are often soon replaced by another story or issue. These issues and priorities can change as quickly as winter weather. A leader has to be ready for anything, sometimes on a daily basis.

For years it has been debated whether "events shape the man," a question

now out of date in today's politics and government, with the growing influence and election of women to public office. It is one of the most profound political changes of modern times, since women have only had the right to vote nationally for a little less than a century. As a result, for the first time in our nation's history, a woman is a serious candidate for president. The nation also has several female governors and legislators, and the congress has a large and growing number of female members, including the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi.

Sometimes, once hardened views have been announced, the necessity for change can result in changes in leaders and

leadership. Case-in-point is the statement, "read my lips, no new taxes," made by Republican nominee George H. W. Bush during the 1988 presidential campaign. Later he had to eat those words and sign into law a major increase in taxes. Many believe this led to his defeat at the hands of Bill Clinton.

Change requires action and challenges leaders to embrace it. It is an essential quality of leadership that change be used and directed for the public's good and that history – and the public – view the results as positive. The challenge for leadership is to accomplish that often elusive goal. ▽