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How 'Bout Some Facts, Not Spin, on the State of the State

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"In-coming Governor McCallum takes the reins faced with the deficits of a slowing economy." So goes the new administration's spin on the current state of the state's budget. With Tommy Thompson's barely out of town, revisionists are already at work on what he's left us.

Wisconsin does face a serious budget situation. The state has an enormous \$600 million current year deficit, and less saved for the future than most people carry in their wallets (the s

State has a total of \$13 in its recession-proofing "rainy day fund"). But that's hardly the fault of our economy. While the latter may have slowed from its 1990s pace, it's hardly in recession (latest reports in fact indicate a renewed uptick in manufacturing). And even if it were, the results wouldn't be showing up yet in budget numbers like these. No, they result instead from the years of budgetary shell games Thompson played during our long boom.

And what's true of the State's budget is true in most major areas of policy. Tommy Thompson wasn't the Devil, but neither was he God -- and Wisconsin under his reign was hardly a continuous happy experiment in democracy and sound policy. Whether it's the condition of our environment or school system, our jobs or communities, or the campaign and administrative systems of government itself, Thompson's legacy is distinctly mixed. And in looking forward to the choices he's left us, a little informed and sober discussion, not spin or continued boosterism, is what's most urgently needed.

This is not to say we need be glum. Wisconsin has unique strengths as a state -- a strong and diversified economy, an exceptional base of public goods, a strong democratic tradition of equality and experimentation. We're blessed with more than our share of soaring eagles, roaring Harleys, and (sometimes) scoring Packers, and some cases really approximate the impossible dream of Lake Wobegone, where "all the men are handsome, all the women good-looking, and all the children are above average." But we've also got some problems. Among them:

Jobs and the Economy

Over the past decade Wisconsin has enjoyed a long period of economic expansion, and unemployment still remains near record lows. But not everyone has shared in the fruits of this prosperity, and average workers aren't much better off than they were 20 years ago. The bottom line is that more Wisconsinites are working, and working longer hours, than ever before, but average family incomes are basically stagnant, and inequality is rising. We need to pay more attention to job quality, not just quantity, and look closely at the state policies that keep us, as a state, from reaching the "high road" of high-productivity and high wages needed to prosper in a new economy. For example: economic development subsidies that are hugely expensive, pit communities against each other, have no accountability, and are not producing the family supporting jobs we need; or a tax system that's shifted more and more of our shared tax burden onto individual wage earners; more on the individual wage earner; and-or policies promoting further sprawl, which doesn't just wreck our environment, but also hollows out and

denies us the benefit of core areas of industrial might.

The Environment

Wisconsin properly prides itself on its historic leadership in environmental policy. And, partly in result of that leadership, many of our most obvious environmental threats seem gone. The bald eagle is thriving; major hazardous waste spills are a rarity; sludge rarely flows directly from the pipe anymore. But we haven't really attended to the environment closely over the past 15 years, and today a number of less obvious threats to it abound. Our water quality is in real danger; our smog levels are among the top in the nation; our systems of solid waste disposal are outmoded and so unregulated that we're now a favored dumping site for other states in the Midwest; and our patterns of energy use (about which we'll be hearing a lot in coming months) are almost altogether missing the enormous "green market" for more efficient and less polluting use that is also a plausible new innovation frontier for our manufacturing base. And along the way, again, we're destroying our cities and our farmland, through largely unregulated sprawl, and a system of municipal government that both burdens local governments unfairly, and promotes their mutual competition for low-end, and typically environmentally degrading, new investment.

Families, Communities and the Future

Along with getting our fiscal house in order, we need to recognize again that the real strength of Wisconsin, as ever, lies in its people, including its young ones. But we have miles to go in reaching the sorts of universal social protections and assists needed to make those people secure and productive. A large part of Wisconsin's historic greatness came from recognizing that just such a system of protection and assists makes sense economically, as well as socially. We pioneered such innovations as Social Security and workers compensation, for example, and built one of the nation's most skilled working classes by being one of the most unionized and best educated through public schools. But union coverage has long since fallen, our schools are fiscally capped from renewed excellence, and health insurance is again, for many families, simply out of reach. A century after LaFollette's first governorship, and the birth of what became known as the "Wisconsin Idea," it's long past time that we had real social service and education reform in Wisconsin -- completing a set of basic insurance protections for everyone here, straightening out school finances, extending access to higher education to all, and again permitting workers voice and representation at the workplace, and in economic and social policy discussion.

Democracy

Doing any of these things requires that we renew our own democratic process. Here again Wisconsin has a distinguished history -- of high voter turnout and a legacy of open, squeaky-clean government and enormous civil involvement. The past 15 years have seen much of that challenged, if not replaced, by ever more dominant special interests, an unhealthy growth of gubernatorial power at the expense of the Legislature, citizen retreat from politics, and the wholesale replacement of organized people by organized money in our election campaigns. We need, at last, real campaign finance reform in the state (meaning something equivalent to public financing of all elections) and modernized voting systems. And we need far better disclosure laws and penalties on the subtle corruptions of lobbying. Recent efforts by Republican Assembly-persons to restrict the suffrage by erecting new hurdles to its exercise are perfect counter-examples to what is needed, which is a re-opening and activation of the electoral process to all -- with all that modern technology, and old-fashioned values of clean government and accountability, can provide.

Recognizing much less acting on any of these state challenges will take leadership -- from our elected officials, from organized groups, from the mass media whose job it partly is to facilitate political discussion (and whose recent coverage of politics has reached all-time lows). But it will also require that all of use, individually, wake up to the fact that, in the end, we do get the government and public policy we "deserve" -- at least in the sense that our ignorance about what's happening in the state is almost a sure guarantee of its corruption. Before we'll ever hear a truthful "State of the State" address, we need to get started on a State of the State discussion among ourselves.

Joel Rogers is director of COWS, the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, at the UW-Madison. On Monday COWS debuted "Sustaining Wisconsin" a statewide dialogue about the future of Wisconsin. The themes expressed in this view of the state of the State will carry through during the next 18 months as COWS uses Sustaining Wisconsin to put the Wisconsin Idea in action. Go to www.sustainingwisconsin.org for more information.



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