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Summary:

The permanent political class in Oregon has little respect for the entrepreneurial spirit. Legislators should stop looking for quick fixes and work on real tax, budget, and other fiscal reforms.

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“...[S]uch advancements will be tougher to come by in the years ahead, because the culture of Oregon has changed. The permanent political class that now rules the state has little respect for the entrepreneurial spirit.”

Power Is the Narcotic of Choice for Politicians

By John A. Charles, Jr.

Oregon’s free-market research center, Cascade Policy Institute, celebrated its 25th anniversary with a gala dinner party on October 20 at the Tualatin County Club. Since its founding in 1991, Cascade has emerged as a leading voice for individual liberty and economic opportunity. Building coalitions with others, Cascade has helped develop innovative policies such as Oregon’s charter school law and the more recently enacted Right-to-Try statute.

Cascade helped Ethiopian immigrants break the Portland taxi cartel and secure a license to operate a new company. The Institute also helped a young Black woman start her hair-braiding business by persuading the legislature to repeal onerous licensing regulations.

And a paper first published by Cascade in 1996 suggesting that 84,000 acres of the Elliott State Forest be sold off helped persuade the State Land Board to do just that; a sale will be approved by the Board in December of this year.

However, such advancements will be tougher to come by in the years ahead, because the culture of Oregon has changed. The permanent political class that now rules the state has little respect for the entrepreneurial spirit.

The 2016 legislative session served as Exhibit A for this change. In the short space of 30 days, the majority party rammed through two major pieces of legislation: (1) a dramatic increase in the minimum wage; and (2) a mandate forcing electric utilities to provide 50% of their retail load from designated “renewable energy” sources.

Each bill only received a few hearings. Vast areas of complexity were brushed aside as unimportant. When hundreds of witnesses showed up pleading for a more incremental approach, they were dismissed. In 35 years of lobbying, I had never seen anything like it.

This was in contrast to Cascade’s early years, when the organization sponsored “*Better Government Competitions*” in 1994, 1996, 1998, and 2000. These events solicited good ideas from citizens about how to make government work better. Top officials including Governor John Kitzhaber and Portland Mayor Vera Katz enthusiastically endorsed Cascade’s “citizens’ suggestion box.”



Today, many elected officials openly disdain the public they serve. They don't want your ideas, just your obedience and your tax dollars. Moreover, if you compromise and give them half of what they want today, they'll be back for the rest tomorrow.

Nowhere was that more evident than with the so-called "coal to clean" bill in 2016. Why was this topic even being discussed when only nine years ago the legislature passed SB 838, which mandated that large electric utilities procure 25% of their power needs from specified "renewable energy" sources by 2025?

SB 838, passed in 2007, was seen as a visionary achievement. The leading legislative advocates, Senator Brad Avakian and Representative Jackie Dingfelder, were exultant. Oregon was now on a path to renewable energy Nirvana!

Yet by 2016, the "25 by 25" banner was seen as wimpy and out of date. Oregon's perceived reputation as an international environmental leader had been undercut by legislation elsewhere. So the new (arbitrary) standard became "50% by 2040."

We can do better than this. Perhaps if Measure 97 fails, legislators will stop looking for quick fixes and work together on tax reform. There are officials in both parties willing to tackle PERS reform and transportation finance, if the Majority party allows it.

Replacing hubris with humility would be a good first step.

John A. Charles, Jr. is President and CEO of Cascade Policy Institute, Oregon's free market public policy research organization. This article originally appeared in the October 2016 edition of the newsletter, "Oregon Transformation: Ideas for Growth and Change."

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