

TEXT OF SEN. PHIL BERGER'S RESPONSE TO GOV. ROY COOPER'S 2019 STATE OF THE STATE ADDRESS, 02-25-2019

(As distributed by the office of Sen. Phil Berger, R-Rockingham)

"Good evening. I'm Phil Berger, and I'm the leader of the North Carolina Senate. I'm a small-town lawyer from Eden, in Rockingham County. My wife, Pat, and I raised our three children in Eden, and they are grown and married and we're now blessed with four grandchildren.

"A quality education changed my life – it's why I have the honor of standing before you this evening, delivering the Republican message regarding the state of our state.

"Tonight, you heard from Governor Roy Cooper about what he'd like to do this session. We have some ideas of our own.

"The 2018 election confirmed two things for me: First, the people of North Carolina believe in the conservative principles of low taxes, reasonable spending, and common-sense regulations. And in November, they returned Republican legislative majorities to Raleigh for the fifth consecutive election.

"Second is the basic idea that you, the voters of North Carolina, expect us to come together to respond to and solve our state's challenges. We've done that before — most recently in response to the catastrophic hurricane damage that still has some of our neighbors living in temporary housing.

"Republicans and some leading Democrats came together on Voter ID as well. After all, a significant majority of you told us in last year's election that you wanted open and honest ballot security measures, in particular a photo voter ID law.

"It remains to be seen whether we will find more bipartisan solutions this legislative session or simply retreat to our corners. I, for one, hope it's the former.

"You see, effective governing sometimes means moving away from the extremes to achieve solutions that both sides can support.

"Republicans are going to have to work across the aisle, but so are Democrats. We're going to have to choose collaboration more often than not, because that's what effective governing requires.

"We can compromise on solutions. But as the Democratic Party across our nation becomes ever more extreme, we will hold the line against radical policies like abortion-on-demand and the socialism inherent in pie in the sky proposals like the Green New Deal.

"The work Republicans do this year won't come as much of a surprise to you. We came into power in 2010 after 140 years of Democratic control with a simple philosophy: to enact policies that provide an equal opportunity for success to everyone willing to work for it.

"Republicans believe that every person deserves a fair shot to create his or her own success regardless of ZIP code, color, or family income – that everybody should have an equal opportunity to be successful.

"Given an equal opportunity, just about any child in North Carolina—whether from Matthews or Cullowhee, Lumberton or Manteo, Shallotte or Eden—can exceed a father or mother’s fondest hopes and dreams.

"Education, which helped me find and realize my potential, is the key to the equality of opportunity on which our philosophy is based.

"The girl from a neighborhood with more crime than hope, or the boy stuck in a forgotten town dreaming of an opportunity: Those children deserve the same chance as the kid in a family with two parents, two cars, and a nice home overlooking a tree-lined street.

"Everyone enters a world full of baggage they can’t control from a past they didn’t create. But we should all face the world with an equal opportunity to realize any future we choose.

"In a merit-based society where success is measured by actions and achievements, not by the circumstances of one’s birth, education is the great equalizer.

"That’s why Republicans have invested record-breaking sums in our state’s education system. Teachers have received pay raises for five consecutive years, and those raises were at or near the top in the entire country for three of those years.

"We’ve also championed parental school choice. Every child is different, and parents deserve to have the power and the opportunity to choose the learning environment that’s best for their kids.

"We removed the arbitrary cap on public charter schools, and we created the Opportunity Scholarship so children from low-income families aren’t left behind simply because of the condition of their birth or the place their parents can afford to live.

"From 2011 to 2017, the number of North Carolina adults with a Bachelor’s Degree has increased by 27 percent.

"And equality of opportunity means a fair shake for everybody, including historically disadvantaged populations.

"On the positive side the number of African American adults with a high school diploma has jumped by 17 percent since 2011, and the number with a Bachelor’s Degree has gone up by 39 percent, with African American women leading the way with a 42-percent increase.

"A similar trend holds for the high school graduation rate, which is up eight percentage points. Since 2011, the gap in high school graduation rates between African American students and all students has been cut in half, from 6.4 percent to 3.1 percent. We must continue to work together to eliminate that gap.

"And in recognition that some students, especially from low-income households, might not think college is financially possible, we created N.C. Promise. Now, at three North Carolina public universities – Elizabeth City State University, UNC Pembroke, and Western Carolina University – tuition is just \$500 per semester.

"There is still much work to be done. The progress made under Republican leadership over the past eight years is undeniable, and it's just getting started.

"On finances, we've turned the state away from the old days and the old ways of ever higher taxes and spending. We enacted historic tax cuts that have fueled our population and jobs growth. 99% of people in North Carolina pay less or no income taxes compared to 2010, and the biggest drop in the effective tax rate went to those earning less than \$50,000 per year.

"We believe the individual citizen is best capable of realizing his or her own full potential. It's government's role to create a fair playing field and predictable rules, and then to step back and let people create their own success.

"That philosophy has guided eight incredible years of growth and progress under Republican legislative leadership, and it's that philosophy that will continue to guide us moving forward.

"Effective governing also means dealing in facts, not fanciful and unrealistic hopes and dreams, and certainly not lodging insults to distract from the merits of an issue. And the facts of responsible Republican leadership are indisputable. Under those policies, graduation rates are up, incomes are higher, taxes are lower, and more people work today in North Carolina than any other time in state history.

"Some of these numbers might surprise you. That's because activists masquerading as unbiased observers tend to withhold or cloud information that doesn't support a particular partisan narrative. They would have you believe that our state is in freefall, that we're going backwards instead of moving forward.

"But nothing could be further from the truth.

"The facts show what you and your neighbors already know to be true: The financial and economic state of our state is the strongest it has ever been. North Carolina is booming under responsible Republican leadership.

"But there is a cloud on the horizon, and it's become even more pronounced in just the past few days. Thomas Jefferson mused 200 years ago that 'one single object...will entitle you to the endless gratitude of society: that of restraining judges from usurping legislation.'

"He could not have better predicted the situation with judges in today's North Carolina.

"On Friday evening with the sweep of a pen, one Democratic judge from Wake County invalidated the will of more than two million North Carolinians who voted to add Voter ID to the state constitution.

"That Democratic judge ruled that the entire Republican state legislature was unconstitutional for more than 1 ½ years based on legal reasoning that, to my knowledge, has never before been sustained in the United States.

"An unrestrained judiciary advancing political theories and political agendas that nobody elected a judge to bring about is a fundamental threat to the ideas our state and this country were founded upon.

"This threat is compounded by the Governor's unchecked power to appoint whomever he chooses to the courts.

"Most recently, the resignation of the Chief Justice of the North Carolina Supreme Court gave Governor Cooper an opportunity to show whether his vision for the judiciary was rooted in partisan politics or grounded in the time-honored rule of law. Unfortunately he cast his lot on the side of politics and in so doing abandoned North Carolina's long tradition of elevating the most senior associate justice to that vacancy.

"The Governor now has an opportunity to appoint another judge to the Supreme Court. Unfortunately, there's legitimate concern that he will again appoint someone based more on politics than merit to expand a partisan judicial supermajority.

"And to what end?

"Look no further than the decision to strike down the Voter ID amendment that you, the people, voted to enshrine in our Constitution. The judiciary, which should be the least political branch of government, is being increasingly utilized to frustrate the will of the people of our great state.

"In closing, low taxes, reasonable regulations, and prudent spending decisions may not generate sensational headlines or drive clicks on websites, but it's the basic formula for effective governing, and it's created a boom decade for our state.

"We intend to improve even more on our success in the coming years. Education, the great equalizer, will remain a top priority, and we do not intend to stray from the low-tax and low-spending principles that have given us so much success.

"Again, I'm Phil Berger. Thank you for your time this evening. Good night."