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Linda Joy Sullivan: Good government requires collaboration

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By Linda Joy Sullivan

Why, having recently an uncontested primary to serve as my district's Democratic candidate for the Vermont House, was I really happy with the results? It's because I garnered enough write-in votes from Republicans to stand as their nominated candidate too. That may sound odd, as I am a firmly committed Democrat. But I was thrilled to see that voters in my district see value in having a Representative who is also firmly committed to working across party lines as necessary to address our State's more vexing challenges. Unfortunately, we have all seen too often labeling, name-calling and sloganeering get in the way of achieving results. It's tiring.

The solution can't always be viewed as electoral — "If only we could get rid of those bums across the aisle, we'd be able to solve all of our problems." Relying on unpredictable shifts in voter attitude to address differences in policy is not the way. Good governance requires a more general willingness to collaborate with others who sometime don't share one's personal views, whether those views are driven by party politics or not. Our most difficult problems deserve not just study and hard-work by elected officials — legislators and members of the executive alike — but a willingness by both to engage in collaborative dialogue and, when necessary, to make difficult compromises whatever the source of

those differences.

In the last few weeks I had the opportunity to participate in two summits, one regional and one national, that addressed two perplexing challenges we face, workforce development and climate change. These are two issues that require our immediate attention as we simply cannot afford to fail on either front — as such, they serve as prime examples of issues that require us to work collectively to develop and advance a unified long-term vision.

Just last week I was in Washington D.C., in my capacity as the state director for Vermont to the National Foundation of Women Legislators, where we spent most of our attention on the need for bipartisan and "large vision" approaches to workforce development. Plainly, with the rapid advancement of automation in the manufacturing and production sectors and the hard-to-predict direction of our global and national service economies, we face enormous challenge in designing workforce development programs that will adequately train Vermonters to participate productively in our evolving regional economy over the next 5 to 30 years. What I learned from this week's summit is that other states across the U.S. are working very hard at adapting their workforce development programs around their vision of this uncertain future — frankly, from what I can see from my service on the House Commerce Committee, many if not most of these states have been working much harder than we have. Unfortunately, we in Vermont seem to burden ourselves by trying too hard to align workforce development programs around the larger needs of our school systems and by focusing largely on addressing short-term labor demands occasioned by our shrinking population. We are going to lose the competition for better, higher paying and career oriented jobs unless we have a workforce prepared to meet the needs of our next generation of employers. We will also, in my opinion, continue to lose our youth to other states unless we provide opportunities for them to stay — or come back — to participate in occupations that interest them.

Adopting an "all shoulders to the wheel" approach will require our legislature to work closely with the Departments of Labor and Commerce to hone the vision necessary to shape our workforce development programs to meet an uncertain future. And, as hard as it is to convince some in Vermont, it absolutely requires as well active partnership with the business community.

The week before that I was invited by the administration to attend the annual conference of New England Governors and Canadian Eastern Premiers, during which a lengthy discussion was had about the current regional approaches to addressing climate change, the most daunting challenge of our lives. As our federal government — at least in the short term — has largely abandoned leadership on this front, achieving progress at the next level down, that is, through regional initiatives, is critical. Again, there is no room here for us to fail.

Fortunately, our New England states have been for some time engaged in deeply collaborative efforts, such as the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative and the Transportation Climate Initiative. As a state, Vermont has also been hard at work — under both Democratic and Republican administrations — to make sure we meet greenhouse gas emissions targets we have set for ourselves. Indeed, just four weeks ago the Vermont Climate Action Commission issued an 83-page report recommending no fewer than 53 specific action steps designed to reduce Vermont's green house gas emissions. The report is thoughtful and an interesting read.

I am hoping, no matter the results of the upcoming elections, we pay careful attention to the recommendations made in the Commission's July 31 report, notwithstanding the fact that these recommendations are being advanced by a Republican administration. Last year there was legislative focus on — and administration opposition to — a carbon-pricing strategy that featured at its core a carbon tax that would in the view of many disproportionately impact homeowners who cannot easily afford residential conversions to more efficient heating solutions and those in rural communities that rely most heavily on automotive transportation (the two biggest contributors, in Vermont, of greenhouse gasses).

Whatever the wisdom and efficacy of the ESSEX plan, carbon pricing is but one part of any comprehensive greenhouse gas reduction strategy. Again, we can't afford to fail here. We have to work and work hard on all available tools at our disposal — no matter who puts the proposals on the table.

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