Gov. Rick Perry's Remarks to the House Republican Caucus

*Note - Gov. Perry frequently departs from prepared remarks.

Tuesday, April 10, 2007

Thank you Frank (Corte.) Let me begin with a word of thanks. The great majority of you were here last summer, and helped pass a record school property tax cut, the bulk of which takes effect this fall. I know it wasn't easy and that it required some difficult votes, but I also know we wouldn't have gotten it done if the majority of men and women in this room didn't come together and make a conscious decision to not only cut property taxes, but reform our business tax. If your constituent mail is like mine, you mostly hear from people when they are mad. And this past election there were a number of people upset. But I believe if you keep doing the right thing, the people will see through the rhetoric and press bias and know whether someone is representing their values. That doesn't mean we can't have a bad election cycle now and then. 2006 was a nationalized election, similar to 1994 when voters were so angry at Bill Clinton they turned 52 Democrat seats over to the Republicans. I heard a polling presentation at the Republican Governor's Association from national Pollster Bill McInturf. I hate talking about polls, and I don't care for leaders that determine their policies based on polls, but this one was interesting because it was taken election night after the polls closed, so it was too late to influence the election, and it involved a huge sample size of 10,000 voters in states with gubernatorial elections. Three findings were interesting.

First, a majority of people voting in governors races across the country said the Iraq War influenced their decision for governor. Second, nine of the ten people who were undecided voters that headed to the polls were against the war in Iraq. Third, and surprising, it didn't show a lower turnout of the Republican base nor an increased turnout of the Democrat base. It showed that swing voters went away from our party in huge numbers, and it had a devastating impact. These three findings show how deeply a national debate or a national political figure can influence local and state races that have no connection to that issue or person, and that a message that only appeals to a party base can come at the risk of losing swing voters, and in this case control of Congress. My conclusion is that, of your friends no longer here, hardly any of them lost because of votes in this chamber, but because of the dissatisfaction over the war, and the fact that Republicans in Congress were spending like Democrats. I have always maintained that if Republicans offer a Democrat Lite alternative, voters will eventually just choose the real thing. Every major negative on the voters minds, the war, spending and ethics emanated out of Washington. Now, James Dunnam thinks it was all because of him, as if he woke up one morning and all of a sudden was an effective mouthpiece for his party after years of criticism without solutions. But frankly I would love it if Democrats elected him permanent chair of their caucus.
Why do I bring up all the misery from the last election cycle? Because while you may not always get credit for the good things you did, such as property tax relief, new money for schools, teacher incentives, lawsuit reform, and the list goes on, if you keep doing the right thing you will eventually get through. But that requires having a positive agenda that we enact this session. Not every election will be like 2006. 2008 will be different, with two different standard-bearers at the top of the ballot, and the potential for a huge turnout of female voters if Hillary Clinton is the Democrat nominee. Think about that- casual female voters may turn out in record numbers. Even if our base does turnout in better numbers than 2006, it may not come close to competing with moderate soccer moms turning out to vote for president. More than any other group, they are not compelled to vote for someone they are against but someone they are for.

Think about it: turnout is lowest when people don't like any of the choices. It is highest when they are energized by a candidate or a close contest. Correspondingly, we cannot put forward an agenda that is based on what we oppose. Our party is in charge. We will get killed if we have no positive agenda to offer this state that emanates out of this session. We have to have a positive, common agenda that we can talk about that relates to people during their dinner table conversations. Whether it is TXU, TYC, TSU, TTC, HPV or any other three letter acronym, if this session is marked by what we are against rather than what we are for, then it will be not only a political disaster, but a public policy disaster. That is not to say we can't disagree from time to time, and I have complete respect for the legislature's authority to express its will on HPV for example, and I will be the first to say we mishandled how this was announced. But we can't get so focused on disagreements that there is a complete void concerning what we set out to accomplish. I am not here to filibuster the time. I want to hear from you. But before I do that let me say a few words about the kind of positive agenda I think can work together to enact.

First, let's protect the integrity of the property tax cut you fought so hard to enact by making sure appraisals don't eat up every ounce of relief in a few short years. I support a revenue cap because if government wants to increase spending by more than five percent, it empowers the voters.

Second, let’s focus on the core issue of border security, which is to fund more boots on the ground, more technology, additional surge operations and a stronger law enforcement presence. Chairman Swinford has a bill that ensures we have a well-coordinated, aggressive border security strategy run by our state office of homeland security, and that ends the practice of creating sanctuary cities that prohibit law enforcement from inquiring about a person’s legal status. I ask you to stand with David and pass this important bill, HB 13.

Third, I also believe we can't repeat the mistake of Republicans in Washington and spend a bunch of money without also protecting taxpayers. You had a good start with a house budget that leaves billions of dollars on the table. But I also ask you to take action on a tighter state spending cap, and to not only eliminate the TIF but every other tax that has outlived its purpose, as well as every funding diversion that takes money away from a vibrant parks center and our trauma centers, to name just a few worthy causes. If we don't end the accounting gimmicks when we have a record surplus, we never will. I know there is hesitation to do this in this room and on the other side of this building. But how do we explain to people that we continue to raise money for one purpose and then use the funds to certify the budget? That we needed the money? They elected Republicans to make the tough choices. I know this isn't easy. I agonized over the budget I proposed as we eliminated $2.7 billion in payment delays and fee diversions. But what's our good answer to explain why we didn't stop this practice when we had a record surplus?

Fourth, I ask you to make the budget more transparent with more line items. Look, I don't want this so I can veto custodial funding at our universities, I want it so Texans can look at their budget and actually have some idea how the money is spent.

If you protect the taxpayers from rapidly rising appraisals, such as with a tax revenue cap, if you pass budget reform and a tighter spending cap, and if you pass a strong border security package, it will be a good session. And if you do all that, and also increase scholarship funding while reforming the higher education formulas, create a research fund to
find the cure for cancer, and provide premium assistance so hundreds of thousands of working Texans can have better access to more affordable insurance, it will be a great session. My staff and I have met with many of you in recent days to hash out a positive, forward-looking agenda. Now we have to agree to work together and not let the Democrats in Austin do what the Democrats in Washington have done: and get Republicans to start fighting with Republicans.

Otherwise, here is the message coming out of session: more traffic, more spending, and more welfare. More traffic because needed projects will be stalled without an alternative proposal to fund them. More spending- billions of dollars more- without an alternative proposal to protect taxpayers, whether it is a revenue cap or a state spending cap. And more welfare spending, with the House going on record recently to expand the government rolls without even yet hearing a proposal to expand the private marketplace. Is this what we have come to as a party? That we would rather have government do what the private sector can do better? That we would rather incrementally march toward Hillary-care instead of making the private market more robust? And that we are capable of spending billions of dollars more, and yet despite a record surplus can’t get rid of accounting gimmicks or even slow the growth of state spending? Or would you rather take a different message back to the local rotary or the local chamber of commerce this June? A message about spending restraint, about appraisal relief, about border security, about a historic increase in financial aid, and about setting our sights on curing cancer and making insurance more affordable for small businesses and middle class workers? I say let’s talk about all those things and more. But it takes us uniting behind a positive agenda.

I want to help you pass that agenda. I want to stand with each of you at the end of session and say to the people of this state, “we did what you sent us here to do.” That’s my hope and my desire, and with seven weeks left there is plenty of time to get the job done. Thank you. I will open it to your thoughts and questions.