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The "New Path"

Minnesota as most of us know it began not far from here, where two great rivers come together. For centuries, people have been drawn to the place where the Minnesota and the Mississippi rivers combine their power and beauty. I believe we stand at such a place in our political landscape today.

The Minnesota-inspired radio show "A Prairie Home Companion" is broadcast from this theater, on this stage. Its music, humor, stories and nostalgia for a simpler time blend together -- to produce the show's particular brand of magic.

Today, as political leaders, we have a charge from the people of Minnesota: to blend the music, the humor, the opinions, and the stories in all of us -- not with nostalgia -- but with a desire to create a better future for the people we serve in a fast-changing and uncertain world.

In such a world, we should always honor and thank those who've given so much. Our United States military and their families remain vigilant and steadfast for our country. Members of the military and veterans are here today. To the men and women of our military and their families: you are our heroes and you are our role models. Thank you.

And today, along with a grateful nation, we honor the memory of President Gerald Ford. His life reflected a spirit of civility and reconciliation. That kind of leadership works and it heals. Please join me in a

moment of silence and prayerful remembrance of the president's life.

Minnesotans also have a spirit of civility. But, we don't live in a time or a place where the voters have given one political party total control. The people of Minnesota have given us shared government, and we need to make it work.

We need to begin that effort with confidence that we can do it. Thankfully, the lessons of history and our own personal experiences confirm that unlikely forces can come together to produce positive results.

The courage to change leads to future success.

Overcoming difficulty develops strength.

Grief and pain release love and empathy.

But history also shows conflict and alienation are powerful forces. We've seen races, generations, genders, economic interests, faiths and political ideologies collide. The fall-out of this conflict is embedded in our media, in our politics, and in our culture.

On this occasion and from this place, I'm calling on every Minnesotan, especially our political leaders, to walk together down a new and better pathway: a path of civility and positive change.

The journey won't be easy. For one thing, the path won't likely be straight. A path that leads anywhere worth going rarely is.

Strong differences of opinion will understandably remain and be aired along the way.

We'll only be successful if we work as a team—committed to a common destination, carrying our share of the load, understanding each other's strengths and limitations, encouraging and helping each other and resisting calls to turn around and go backwards. We must move forward.

We will regularly hear the drumbeat of the pundits and the special interests suggesting our destination should simply be to “meet in the middle” or go no further.

But, the people we serve deserve and desire more than just a lukewarm result – one that just splits the difference between liberals and conservatives and inevitably results in a least common denominator agenda. We can do much better than that.

This will require leaders who are willing to take risks and rise above the heavy gravity of entrenched and powerful interests, including some of those on their own side.

New leaders at the Capitol give us renewed hope this will happen.

On the new path, here are two suggestions for a successful journey:

Let's be conservative by embracing the tried, tested and true approaches that are working and the values that steady and guide us.

And let's be progressive as we improve and overhaul things that aren't working well or have us on the wrong course.

We need to keep what works, change what doesn't and have the wisdom to know the difference.

In the coming weeks, I'll unveil a series of policy proposals that I hope the Legislature will consider and pass. And, I sincerely look forward to hearing and considering their ideas. For today, though, let me briefly address two issues that are mission critical to Minnesota's future and also suggest how we can make progress along the new path.

More than twenty years ago, visionaries in the conservation and environmental movement imagined a future where we would reduce harmful pollution and our reliance on foreign oil by moving aggressively towards alternative energy and energy independence.

Many leaders of the time snickered and were dismissive of the message and the messengers. Those leaders lacked the vision to see the future or lacked the courage to stand up to entrenched interests that protected the status quo.

An alternative energy plan is urgently needed now. Our country remains addicted to oil. That addiction is

an imminent threat to our national security, economic security, our environment, and it limits economic development, especially in our rural areas.

Entrenched opponents remain but together let's lead the way forward by passing a next generation renewable energy plan. It should feature a dramatic increase in the use and production of alternative energy in Minnesota, including a requirement that twenty five percent of our energy come from renewable sources by the year 2025.

We similarly need to rise to the grave and present challenges in public education.

We're proud that Minnesota is at or near the top in so many measures of student performance and achievement.

And we're sincerely grateful for the educators and others who work so hard in our schools.

But they work in a system that was largely designed in a bygone era, for students with bygone behaviors -- preparing for a bygone economy.

For example, the high school experience has become an expensive academic holding pattern, or worse, for way too many of our high school students.

Minnesota high schools need to be dramatically overhauled and modernized.

Just like in the alternative energy debate, bold reform here will require the vision to see the future and courage to stand up to powerful, entrenched interest groups and defenders of the status quo.

This will not be easy or natural for many policymakers, but the future of our state literally depends on it.

The humble beginnings of our state offer an analogy that is useful today. In March 1849, the federal government created the Minnesota territory.

But because telegraph lines had not yet reached St. Paul and the Mississippi River was still frozen, news of our recognition as a new territory didn't reach Minnesota for several more weeks until the river thawed and the first steamboat of spring made its way up the river. We were a territory for awhile before we even knew it.

Perhaps we're experiencing something like that again.

I think it's already happened in the hearts of Minnesotans all across the State. They already know we need to come together. We just need the political institutions and politicians to thaw enough to receive the good news and act upon it.

When it comes to Minnesota's future, I'm full of hope. I know we can come together to blend our ideas and strengths on a new path to Minnesota's future.

Abraham Lincoln gave his second inaugural address at a time of war and division and ended the speech with

these words, "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in..."

By removing the political malice and enhancing our charity toward each other and new ideas, we can make our way down the new path. Together, we can strive for something better and arrive at a place that serves Minnesotans well.

May God bless you and may God continue to bless the great state of Minnesota.