

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

Governor Jindal Gives Remarks to Opening of 2015 Legislative Session

BATON ROUGE – Today, Governor Bobby Jindal delivered his address at the opening of the 2015 Legislative Session.

NOTE: Below are the Governor's remarks as prepared for delivery. Governor Jindal will speak off-the-cuff during the conclusion of the speech.

REMARKS

Mr. Speaker, Mr. President, Statewide Elected Officials, Members of the Legislature, the people of Louisiana –

It is an honor to be here with you again.

Well...here we are...at the moment that some of you have been waiting for a long time – my last state of the state speech.

No, that was not supposed to be an applause line...and I do appreciate your restraint.

I'd like to start by asking you to think back to ten years ago, about the time that Hurricanes Katrina and Rita hit our state, Louisiana was at rock bottom.

Our economy was stagnant, we had over two decades of outmigration with more people leaving Louisiana than moving here, jobs were scarce, and the future didn't look so bright...and then the storms hit.

You actually had national political leaders suggesting that maybe New Orleans shouldn't even be rebuilt.

We lost more than 1,000 citizens in those storms, and many thousands more who did survive left the state.

It's been said that you can only really know the true character of a people when the going gets rough.

What happened next showed the true nature of the people of Louisiana.

We are fighters, we never give up, and we all came together to bring Louisiana back.

Fast forward to today, and you see a far different picture of Louisiana, and you see the true greatness of our people.

Together – we rebuilt and we are today stronger than we have ever been.

Together – We cleaned up our ethics laws so that now – what you know is more important than who you know.

Together – We reformed our education system so that now – we provide choices and hope for children who were previously trapped in failing schools.

Together – We reformed our health care system so that now – it takes 10 minutes to fill a prescription instead of 10 days.

And most importantly, today our economy is booming. We have more people living in Louisiana than at any time in our state's history, and more people working in Louisiana than at any other time in our state's history. We have 90,000 more jobs from companies that have expanded in our state, and we have many more on the way.

At the same time we have balanced our budget every year, we cut taxes, and have received eight credit upgrades.

I want to stop right here and acknowledge a few things:

First – notice that I use the term “we” and not I.

There is not really much that any of us can accomplish on our own, and without all of us pitching in, none of this would have happened.

Second – none of this has been easy, and we all bear the scars to prove that.

The way I figure it, it's not really very hard to be a popular politician. All you need to do is not rock the boat, not change anything, and spend all your time kissing babies and cutting ribbons.

But what is the point in that? We all came here to serve our fellow citizens and to make our state a better place to live and to thrive and to achieve the American Dream.

Yes, some of us have a different perspective on how we reach that goal, but I do believe that we all want the same thing for the people in our state.

I also want to acknowledge that a lot of what we have done has been controversial, and many of us in this room have had big disagreements. Reform is always controversial, and democracy is messy.

But the end result is a stronger more prosperous Louisiana for our children.

I also want to acknowledge that there is much left to do. As long as we have people looking for work and not finding it, we have more to do.

I know that my critics contend that we have cut taxes too much, and have cut government too much. I respect that opinion, but I don't agree with it.

It's an honest difference of approach, and I think we can achieve more if we respect each other's views.

I measure Louisiana's prosperity NOT by the prosperity of our government, but rather by the prosperity of our people.

The truth is, none of us works for the government. In fact, no government worker works for the government. All of us, elected or not, work for the people of the state of Louisiana. And it is an honor and a privilege to do so.

I also want to acknowledge what you all already know – that I haven't done everything perfectly.

In politics everyone gets dug into a corner to the point where they pretend that they are always completely right and their opponents are always completely wrong, and that's a mistake.

Now I want to highlight three things of great importance as we begin our legislative session.

First...what's on everyone's mind – the budget.

We must balance our budget without raising taxes on our people. It is their money, not ours.

I know there is heartburn in this room, in the media, and probably with some of our constituents about the budget challenge we face this year as a result of falling oil prices along with our refusal to raise taxes the past several years.

But I have the utmost confidence that we are going to come together, make smart reductions to the size of government where we can, and yet again have another balanced budget that doesn't raise taxes.

The easy way out for politicians is to raise taxes. Or, if we were in Congress, we would just print more money and borrow more from the Chinese.

But we don't live by Washington's rules of kicking our debts down the road. And when it comes to raising taxes, we know that when government takes more of our people's hard earned money our economy lags, job growth lags, and we put families in a tight spot.

I'd rather have the government cut its budget, than force families to cut their budgets.

It all comes down to this – do we think that we can spend our citizens' money better than they can? I do not.

That being said, I know government provides some vital services, and I want those services protected, provided they are running efficiently and not being wasteful.

That is why we have laid out a budget proposal that seeks to protect higher education, health care and other important government functions by going after wasteful state spending in our tax structure.

The truth is, today we have a system of corporate welfare in this state.

Our businesses are a great asset. But we cannot stand idly by while companies pay zero in state taxes and then continue getting free taxpayer money from the government on top of it.

If companies are getting checks from the taxpayer as opposed to paying taxes, then that is government spending that needs to be examined and reduced.

It would be wrong for us to impose cuts to higher education, in order to protect this corporate welfare.

We have identified over \$500 million of corporate welfare spending that we think should be cut to help protect higher education and health care.

I know there are some in this chamber that will want to reject cutting corporate welfare and instead try to raise tax rates or eliminate other tax credits that help a business lower its tax liability.

But I hope we remember how we got to the point we are today where we have more people working, with higher incomes, than ever before.

We didn't get here by raising taxes and expanding the size and scope of government.

We raised accountability for our schools, graded them, and held them responsible for their own growth.

As a result, in the last six years, Louisiana has seen unprecedented gains in education. Our graduation rates are at an all time high, and we've cut the number of failing schools in half.

But just as important as our educational improvement is the way in which we achieved it—by expanding choices for parents, not limiting them, and demanding equal opportunity in education.

These are hallmarks of education reform with proven results all over the country, and yet the federal government is only interested in rewarding adherence to a nationalized set of standards.

I believe we can pass legislation that makes clear that the federal government or third parties do not have control over Louisiana's schools, and help ensure that Louisiana parents and teachers create Louisiana standards and curriculum.

I believe this session that we can come together on a plan that removes Common Core from Louisiana and replaces it with high-quality Louisiana standards.

Third – there is a nationwide push by the far left to weaken the first amendment to the Constitution –

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech...

We either believe in religious liberty or we don't. In Louisiana, I believe we do.

I know there has been legislation filed this session that aims to protect religious liberty rights in Louisiana.

Let me be crystal clear – I absolutely intend to fight for the passage of this legislation – and any other that seeks to preserve our most fundamental freedoms.

And let me be clear about something else – in Louisiana, we do not support discrimination, and we do support religious liberty, and we believe that we can uphold both of those values simultaneously.

The truth is, this should not be a conservative vs liberal debate. Last I checked, we were all in favor of the Bill of Rights.

And here in Louisiana, as long as I'm your Governor, we will protect religious liberty and not apologize for it.

I want to directly address the legislation that was filed to protect these freedoms in Louisiana and clear up some falsehoods about the bill we have already started to hear:

All this bill does is provide necessary protections for individuals to prevent adverse treatment from the state based on religious beliefs regarding marriage.

This legislation DOES NOT allow a restaurant or industry to refuse service to a gay or lesbian person.

The law merely ensures the state cannot deny a license, certification, accreditation, or contracts, to a person or a business on the basis of their sincerely held religious belief about marriage.

It does NOT provide a right for a business owner to discriminate against gays or lesbians.

We got here by drastically lowering taxes and empowering growth in Louisiana's private sector.

It's true that fiscal responsibility isn't easy. But it works.

And I am proud to say the economy is bigger, the government is smaller and our state is stronger than ever.

I know if we stick to the principles that got us here we will continue this trend.

Second, I want to talk to you about education reform.

In my very first year as Governor, we worked together to create a school choice program for children in New Orleans.

Every year since – we've worked together to implement some of the most comprehensive and ambitious reforms in our state's history.

It was difficult work, but our children are the beneficiaries of that work.

This is an issue I care deeply about – and that's why I am here to tell you, we have to get rid of Common Core.

This is not a debate about high standards. I'm all for high standards, and I think we all are. This debate has nothing to do with that.

This is about the federal government deciding that they need to set the standards for us because we are not sophisticated enough to do it on our own.

This is a question of federal control of education. This is about federal coercion with the federal government attempting to blackmail us with our own tax dollars.

This is about the federal government finding a back door way to dictate curriculum to our state and to every state.

I have met with parents and teachers and I've read the flood of letters to the editors of local papers begging the education establishment to listen and slow down to reevaluate Common Core.

And I know this first hand from sitting down and doing homework with my kids.

Today we are at a crossroad. We have a choice – a choice regarding who will run education in Louisiana.

Louisiana parents and teachers or the federal government? I will take teachers and parents every chance I get.

I care deeply about high, rigorous standards... they were embedded in me at an early age.

My father was not happy with straight A's. If my brother or I got a 95%, he wanted to know what happened on the other 5%.

I have brought that mindset to education reform in Louisiana. We've made increased rigor and achievement the central pillars of our reforms.

We raised accountability for teachers while increasing professional development.

I think we can all agree that the government should never force someone to participate in a marriage ceremony against their will.

But today, people, charities and family-owned businesses are at risk of being penalized by the state because they believe in the traditional definition of marriage.

Regardless of your beliefs about the definition of marriage, we should all respect the right of our neighbors to hold a different view.

There used to be bipartisan support for the principle of religious liberty.

However, these days, some think diversity of belief is too risky and scary to be tolerated. But that's wrong.

In America we should celebrate diversity of belief. Diversity of belief and religious liberty are the foundation of our law and Constitution and they should be protected.

In the United States, a state should not be able to take adverse action against an individual for holding a sincerely held religious view regarding marriage. That would be true discrimination.

***The Governor will go off the cuff for the remainder of the speech.**

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