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McCrory's well-rehearsed mantra

CHRIS FITZSIMON

Former Charlotte Mayor Pat McCrory was making the rounds at television stations across the state in the last few days leading up to his formal announcement for governor on Tuesday.

McCrory's "one-on-one" interviews with news anchors not only provided a preview of his campaign kickoff but also a sense of the themes he plans to use in his second bid for governor.

The only surprise was how simplistic everything seems in McCrory's world. The answers to all of our problems can be found in a few carefully crafted focus-group talking points.

State government and the state's economy are both broken, and he plans to fix them. Public schools aren't working either, and we shouldn't spend any more money until we fix those too. Economic-development policy – you guessed it, it's broken.

It's a wonder the state hasn't simply fallen into the ocean.

McCrory didn't offer any specifics about all the fixing he plans to do in Raleigh, but he's a reformer. Just ask him.

And if you are wondering how his campaign strategy changed with the news last week that Gov. Beverly Perdue is not running for reelection, it hasn't. He is running against her anyway, repeatedly promising to change the Perdue/Easley culture in Raleigh, whatever that is.

He is also against Perdue's proposal to raise the state sales tax to restore some of the Republican General Assembly's deep cuts to education.

Schools, like the rest of state government, need to do more with less, to quote another McCrory cliché. That will come as a surprise to many teachers and principals who are already doing all they can with far less than they need.

It also might be tough for those at-risk 4-year-olds locked out of early-childhood programs by McCrory's pals in the legislative leadership, but those kids need to do more with less too. Same for folks with mental illness or a disability – toughen up, less is more.

That's the way the private sector does it, as McCrory reminded his interviewers again and again.

You can't blame this week's entire cliché-fest on McCrory. The anchors were his willing accomplices in saying virtually nothing, asking broad questions and never following up. And those were the good ones.

One anchor asked McCrory, "Why is it that some Democrats and even some Republicans have a tough time pulling away from the public trough?"

Quite a probing question from the liberal media that House Speaker Thom Tillis keeps complaining about.

McCrory says he wants to turn the state around, but it's already careening wildly to the right, thanks to Tillis, Senate President Pro Tem Phil Berger and the rest of the folks running the General Assembly that McCrory likes to praise.

Does that mean he agrees with their extremist agenda?

Does he think 13-year-old rape victims who become pregnant should be forced to look at an ultrasound before accessing abortion services?

Does he believe that victims of crime should have fewer services available to them? That no more scholarships should be provided for bright high school students who want to be teachers?

Does he think that the state constitution should ban local governments from providing benefits to same-sex partners of their employees? How about allowing people to carry concealed handguns in parks?

Would he join with Tillis and the House majority and allow consumer finance companies to jack up the interest rates on emergency loans even though the commander of every military base in North Carolina is trying to stop it?

Those are a few of the questions McCrory needs to answer. There are plenty more, and none of them has to do with a trough.

As for the culture in Raleigh, Gov. Perdue is not running and Mike Easley left office in 2008.

The Tillis/Berger extremist crowd is now in charge. Voters need to know if McCrory is with them.

Chris Fitzsimon is the executive director of N.C. Policy Watch.

NEWS ITEM: PRESIDENT SINGS AL GREEN AT APOLLO THEATER ...



LETTERS

External alarms

"Man has too long forgotten that the earth was given to him for usufruct alone, not for consumption, still less for profligate waste." So begins the censure of man's destructiveness by George P. Marsh dating back to the earliest part of the 20th century. Two hundred species are extinguished each day. Think for just a minute about your physical composition. Are you somehow disconnected from the myriad probiotic, semi-autonomous system-of-systems that is steadily engaged in your organismal upkeep? I would argue that this exsanguinous conquest is providing ample evidence for why it is essential to alter our modern mode of existence, immediately.

Do you realize that your brain is comprised of billions of nervous cells, a series of electrically excitable, physically interconnected and interdependent modules of operation? Enjoyment, motion, endurance, cooperation, sadness, apathy, discourse and intercourse – all preceded by an unprecedented cascade of brain activity that "time stamps" each and every moment as unique, fragile – both memorial and ever-fading. One could make the argument that some of these brain states, just like a more physical consciousness (e.g., pain, fatigue) are an indication of our spiritual tolerance for an environment. So we have a culture that medicates our lack of spiritual tolerance. Depressed? Take this pill – or maybe anxious? Try this one. Rather than treating these conditions as a hypersensitivity to the toxicity of the environment we treat these conditions as isolated events, disconnected from the world at large. It is a statement that speaks volumes of our inability to "strike at the root [of evil]," as Thoreau would say.

So our culture is rapidly unbalancing a fine chemical equilibrium that nature has worked eons to establish. We are internalizing numerous alarms that are screaming for us to act. What are these external alarms? Maybe it is poverty? Maybe it is the devastation of formerly vast lands and the climate problem? Maybe it is the erosion of soil quality and agribusinesses' role in short-term solvency? Maybe it is the fact that air and water quality is a seriously debated campaign platform? All of these, I think, are indications of our present inability to call Earth our home, a recognizable community. As we continue to ignore the external consequences of blatant irresponsibility, new and potentially more violent alarms will evolve. When will we learn that our health is tied to the health of this land? When we put our faith in private property and escape to our insular vignettes it is unsurprising that we experience a private despair, a longing to find purpose in our destructive selfishness.

JAMES H. MYERS
Chapel Hill

Independent investigation needed

The latest incarnation of the Chapel Hill town government's fumbling quest to cover up the Yates incident is a joke, and may be the most politically revealing. Town Manager Roger Stancil, and presumably the mayor and police chief, have come out with their newest attempt to prevent the truths of this incident from receiving credibility.

Tasked by the council last week with providing a potential budget for an independent investigation, requested in an 11-page report by the town's Community Policing Advisory Committee, Stancil instead presented a counter-proposal in four documents, which he sent to the council at 4:42 p.m. this Monday, barely more than two hours before the meeting would start.

Despite this 11th hour release, the council was ready to vote on Stancil's proposal not two minutes after discussion began. For such a charged issue that has divided the community and brought national scrutiny upon the town, this seems like a rather hasty decision – unless, of course, they'd already made up their minds, say, on Nov. 13?

Instead of an investigator, trained to ask the right questions to the right subjects and equally skilled at piecing together hundreds of stories into a factual timeline, Stancil proposes a website where anyone can post information about the incident, with the CPAC left to pick up the pieces.

The government has yet again sidestepped actually voting on this independent investigation, which Jim Neal petitioned

LETTERS POLICY

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on Nov. 21 and again on Jan. 9, and which the CPAC petitioned on Jan. 23. According to the mayor, with whom I spoke after he adjourned the meeting, the investigation is now "in the ether," and the council won't consider it unless yet another petition is brought to them.

ALEX KOTCH
Durham

Remember the victims of Paterno's disregard

Jock Lauterer's toss-away comment as he memorialized Joe Paterno, " ... and now tainted legacy of the late JoePa" gives little respect or honor to the victims of Paterno's blatant disregard for the law and his absence of human decency. He was a "force of nature" all right, and along with Sandusky, leaves in his wake broken bodies, broken dreams, broken lives. Football is meaningless in the face of this tragedy. I certainly respect and enjoy Jock's work, but was deeply disturbed and disappointed with this week's Thousand Words.

PATRICIA BRADSHAW
Hillsborough

Wealth and greed related, not synonymous

Relevant definitions of wealth:

1. rich or valuable contents or produce: the wealth of the soil
2. the state of being rich; prosperity; affluence: persons of wealth and standing

greed/greedy:

1. excessively or inordinately desirous of wealth, profit, etc.; avaricious: the greedy owners of the company

The democratic principle for balance of power dictates the construct of capitalism must generously replenish the soil from which wealth comes from.

- Our existing vulnerable environment is the result of:
- Wall Street and banks who apply deceit and support self regulation;
 - a Supreme Court that can alter an election;
 - the manipulation and influence of politicians resulting in their failure to represent the people; and
 - the manipulation of a sustainable tax code to benefit the 2 percent.

An economy is only durable if it is protected from abuse. Powerful investors and financial institutions sidestepped loosened regulations to manipulate control in their favor, to the detriment of the national and global economy. This is why we should establish enforceable regulation, which higher taxes on the wealthy would pay for. Self-monitoring will always be fallible.

Obama admits Congress is broken. He and others have been trying to fix it. There is little to no cooperation by a Congress influenced by Robber Barons. These people are not patriots, they are traitors (intentional or not). The 98 percent are in this together, both conservative and liberals. These ideologies should complement one another, not polarize. Polarizations symptoms are a lack of compassion, empathy, fairness and creativity of conservatives and liberals.

The disease of greed must be aggressively treated, especially in the 2 percent who control the economy, society and the environment. It is destroying it and themselves.

We need a lynch mob with a rope of votes. The people have the capacity to change this situation, but there needs to be an extreme response from the public, sufficient to change the rule of law to prevent inappropriate, unethical lobbying, filibustering and the politicizing of the Supreme Court. Conservatives and liberals must unite with a goal to protect wealth from greed. Our abundance is threatened by the hoarding of wealth. Caring for our potential wealth is no different than with a garden – it must replenish itself if it is to provide a reoccurring yield.

The needs of the 98 percent are intended to be protected in the Constitution. Oligarchies must durably fertilize and reseed the soils which gave them wealth or be plowed back into the fields from which they came ...

May it be so.

TOM O'DWYER
Chapel Hill

Scenes from a poverty tour – Part 2

The is the second in a series of columns on poverty, inspired by a recent North Carolina NAACP-sponsored tour of high-poverty regions of our state.

The bus rolled out of Raleigh about dawn heading east to Washington, or, if you'd rather, Little Washington. Some of us – students, community leaders and organizers; a few lawyers; some press; and several reverends – were still shaking off an early-morning start.

Bishop Gene Hatley was at the wheel as we paralleled the Tar River through Wilson and Greenville into sound country. Along the way, each town got a little smaller and the spaces between them sparser.

We got to Washington, our first stop, around 10 a.m. and rode to the heart of town to a gathering at the Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, a church founded in the waning days of the Civil War and now located in a brick-and-wood jewel built by former slaves and their children in 1902. The church's official history includes this description:

"Metropolitan was not left untouched by the Depression, however. Terrorist groups pitted poor Whites against poor Blacks. But the members of Metropolitan continued caring for one another. Land-owners who owned small businesses and farmed would share their food with poorer families. Church members worked to continue the academic, spiritual, and material growth of the children. This self-reliance and hard work were the keys to getting Metropolitan through the Depression."

Today in Beaufort County, almost 10,000 of its 50,000 residents live below the poverty line. During the recent recession, the number of people on food assistance has skyrocketed from 6,185 in September 2007 to 17,172 as of September 2011.

With the community hit hard by the recession, the church, led by Rev. David Moore, is a refuge once more for a growing number of neighbors. Volunteers prepare daily meals for the hungry and have set up an emergency shelter.

It had gotten down below freezing the night before we arrived and around 20 people who had nowhere to go in a town whose motto is "Pride in the past, faith in the future" spent the night in the Metropolitan's basement.

Upstairs that morning, in a sanctuary lit by the January sun streaming through ancient panels of stained glass, we heard the first round of stories that for the next two days would be eerily similar – stories of lifelong struggles against the odds and what little was built or saved lost because of a storm or a battle with an illness or an employer shutting down.

Those who stood up to tell their stories were not the caricatures drawn of the poor, but the real poor, the invisible poor.

Charlette Blackwell Clark, who cleans houses for a living and lives in a storm-damaged trailer she cannot afford to fix, said she is "tired of struggling, tired of being beaten down."

Like so many, she is being turned away or put on long waiting lists to get some assistance to pay for the repairs. She might, as she puts it, "talk country," but she understands the consequences of budget cuts in housing-assistance programs in a way no policy analysts can feel. This is her home, and she doesn't want to leave.

"Let me get on my feet right here in Washington," she said. "I'll strive to do whatever I have to do."

There were people like Charlette, real fighters, at each gathering. And there was almost always someone – often a veteran – who returned home, saw things through new eyes and pondered the chasm between this nation's words and our deeds.

Waylon Whitley, from the small Beaufort County community of Pantego, was one of them. He stood at the lectern at the Metropolitan and told us of returning home and beginning a 21-year fight to get sewer service and decent drinking water for his community.

Pantego is one of those places where the lack of infrastructure is a legacy of racial inequality, where black neighborhoods with no services are surrounded by white neighborhoods that have long had them.

Whitley said that when he started the fight for services in 1985, his community was living in third-world conditions. Changing that wasn't just a question of finding money for the infrastructure, but battling an entrenched political system and an attitude among too many that nothing could be done to change things. It's a message he continues to preach.

"We owe it to ourselves to insert ourselves in the situation and make it better."

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