

Remarks of Seattle City Councilmember Tim Burgess
2nd Inauguration
City Hall, Seattle City Council

January 3, 2011

Thank you, Katie. You and your sisters make me a very proud father.

It is an honor for me to serve the people of Seattle on their City Council. I hope and pray I will always be worthy of the people's trust and confidence.

I also want to thank my colleagues, who make this job so enjoyable and rewarding. And a specific "shout out" to those who provide so much support and help us get our work done—our Administrative Team, City Clerk staff, and the super brains of this floor, our Central Staff analysts and counselors, and finally, to my Legislative Assistants—Betsy Graef, Rebekah Pape, Tobias Pulliam, Nate Van Duzer, and our intern, Tre Owes.

As my colleagues have already mentioned, it's pretty obvious we face some significant challenges that are both material and philosophical in nature.

Materially, we almost certainly have more budget cuts coming. But we can deal with these if we listen carefully for the people's priorities and seek our fellow City employees' ideas and recommendations.

But, I am an optimist. (I think you have to be these days to run for political office, right?) One way or another, we will find our way through these material challenges.

I am more concerned by the fundamental, philosophical challenges currently facing government.

Many, many of our fellow citizens across America argue that government is the problem. Some believe that everyone in government is incompetent; even worse, others believe that people in government are competent but corrupt, completely at the beck and call of special interests and their lobbyists. Unfortunately, people in our job category—we call ourselves "elected officials," others use more colorful names—don't always help counter these views. Our political discourse and our ability to get things done can be pretty shameful.

This really isn't news, is it? We all know there is a crisis in confidence in government. We could all tell lots of stories confirming this.

But, there are other stories . . . grander, more powerful stories to be told. These are the stories that focus on the value and importance of government in this country—the narrative of a government that provides opportunity for a fulfilling life and a government that takes care of those to whom such a promise has been denied. A government that seeks every day to serve the common good.

This narrative includes the police officers and firefighters who sacrifice time with their families over the holidays to protect us, and sometimes sacrifice their lives as we recently saw with the tragic death of United States Park Ranger Margaret Anderson at Mt. Rainier.

It includes the visionary leaders and workers of Seattle who built dams in the early 20th century so that today, 100 years later, we receive clean electricity every time we flip a switch.

It includes a long history of regulations protecting workers and establishing a fair, even playing field for businesses, like the new law we passed last year that provides paid sick and safe leave.

This is a narrative that challenges those who want government to shrivel away.

And, it's our job to make certain this better narrative continues. We'll do that by making certain we are in fact delivering government services effectively and efficiently. So let's improve our measurement of outcomes. Let's incorporate evidence-based practices. Let's continue to hold ourselves and our employees to a higher standard of accountability and ethical behavior. Let's prove to our taxpayers that we are investing their money wisely.

Every person in these chambers, and every person in this city, has a direct role in making sure Seattle continues to be a great place to live, work, play, or study . . . a great place to raise a family . . . a great place to start a business . . . a great place to retire and grow old. The essence of this city affects who we are. It's deeply personal. So let's accept personal responsibility for restoring trust and confidence in our government.

As I was preparing for today, a quote by British writer G.K. Chesterton was suggested to me as a way to ram this point home. Here's what Chesterton said, "Democracy is like blowing your nose. You may not do it well, but it's something you ought to do yourself." I think Chesterton got it right.

Jon Talton also got it right in The Seattle Times yesterday. He wrote about the economic crisis facing our country. He ended with this paragraph: "We must reclaim something at the heart of the American promise. A balance between individualism and the truth that we're all in this together. We're not just consumers but citizens, not merely economic actors but souls bound on the same journey."

Chesterton and Talton wrote about the same coin, really. One side individualism, the other side our shared journey.

Democracy is something we must do ourselves, together. I'm up for that challenge and I know you are, too.