

Bygone Should Stay Gone

by

Randolph J. May

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In his March 5 Close to Home column "The Governor Is a Bad Influence," Tim Maloney chastised Maryland Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. for being too "political" in urging business leaders to make their views known. Specifically, he charged that Ehrlich had urged business leaders to "get threatening" and "dangerous" in dealing with the largely Democratic legislature.

Maloney found this language too harsh and "not language Marylanders are used to hearing from their governor." I wonder, though, if the former Democratic legislator was shocked when State Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. (D-Calvert), referring to Republican leaders, told the Democratic caucus early in the legislative session, "[W]e're going to shoot them down. We're going to bury them face-down in the ground, and it'll be 10 years before they crawl out again."

Yes, it would be nice if political discourse were conducted on a higher plane, but I suspect that what really bothers Maloney is what Ehrlich's challenges to businesses might signify for the future of Maryland governance.

Maloney said Ehrlich's goal "is not so much to govern as to create conflict" and that "bipartisanship, predictability and consensus governance," traits that inspire business confidence, have declined under Ehrlich. In other words, he liked things better when Democrats controlled the executive and legislative branches of state government.

When one party controls both popularly elected branches, the result is less partisanship, more consensus and perhaps more predictability. Those values are not unimportant, and at times in governing, say, during a crisis, may be paramount. But when the voters elected Ehrlich, they were opting for a change -- a reduction in the rate of growth in Maryland's budget, a lowering of the state's above-average tax burden, improvement of the state's middling business climate, gains in education and reduction of unnecessary regulation, such as the so-called Wal-Mart bill the legislature passed over Ehrlich's veto. With the Wal-Mart bill, Maryland became the only state to impose a payroll tax on a single employer that the legislature deemed to be providing an insufficient level of health insurance.

In a democracy, governance often generates conflict. The Founding Fathers understood that what James Madison in Federalist Paper No. 10 labeled "factions" would divide "society into different interests and parties" representing different political philosophies. The conflict generated by these factions is necessary to achieving sound democratic governance. Conflict educates the public; frames and sharpens policy perspectives and

alternatives; organizes electoral support around issues that matter to citizens; and makes the political environment more competitive.

With a sure knowledge of human nature, in the same Federalist paper, Madison warned that ambitious men in the various parties would seek to arouse "mutual animosities" and "unfriendly passions" and even seek to "vex and oppress each other." But the remedy is a government of separated and diffuse powers.

So, although I might agree with Maloney that not much would be lost if the governor and the Senate president cooled the political rhetoric, and although I can understand why a former Democratic legislator in a state with a heavily Democratic legislature might be more comfortable with less partisanship and more consensus as in bygone days, I can't agree that Maryland would be better off with more consensus.

Indeed, Marylanders almost certainly will be better off if Erlich follows through on his pledge to the Maryland Chamber of Commerce last fall that "there's going to be a respectful clash of philosophical orientations." That clash is a sign of a healthy political environment, and one that almost always leads to better government.

-- Randolph J. May

is president of the Free

State Foundation, a nonprofit

Maryland think tank.

rmay@freestatefoundation.org

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