

Final Report to the People of Illinois

January 7, 1953

Radio address: Adlai Stevenson II's final report to the people of Illinois

Excerpt

“The efficient functioning and integrity of government depend upon attracting to public life honest, competent, loyal men and women. Of all the things I have tried to do nothing is more important than the progress we have made in bringing to and retaining in the state service capable men and women without regard to politics.”

Background:

This radio address was Adlai Stevenson's farewell as Illinois governor. Though popular, Stevenson did not run for reelection, choosing instead to run for president.

During his four years in Springfield, he earned a reputation as a reformer dedicated to cleaning up state government. In this speech, he listed his administration's accomplishments. These included initiatives to improve living conditions in state mental hospitals and prisons. He also instituted a merit system for the State Police force. A merit system meant troopers were now hired more for their experience and skill rather than their political connections.

Stevenson's belief in the importance of public service is a theme that runs throughout this address. He believed citizens had the responsibility to serve the public good. This could mean running for elective office, joining a local service organization, or supporting a charitable cause.

In order to attract honest, skilled citizens to government careers, Stevenson supported the expansion of the state civil service system. He believed a non-politicized and professional workforce would lead to “better service, less cost and waste, and restored public confidence” in government. He touted the “steady gain” in number of state employees under the civil service system. When he took office, roughly half the workforce fell under civil service. When he left office, the number had reached 70 percent.

Stevenson also detailed work left undone. For example, he called for modernization of the state's outdated court system. He also wanted the state to adopt fair employment laws to prevent discrimination in the workplace. With so much unfinished business, he also spoke about his original intention to run for a

second term as governor. “But my party asked me to run for president,” he noted, “and, after preaching the gospel of public service so long, I didn’t see how I could consistently decline.”

FULL TEXT of radio broadcast — final report to the people of Illinois, January 7, 1953:

I wish I could review here everything that has been done or attempted since 1949 to improve our state government. I should like to review these crowded years department by department—from hunting and fishing and wildlife conservation to insurance regulation—our successes and our failures, our triumphs and defeats, what I’ve learned that’s so and what I’ve learned that isn’t so. I would like to talk to you about politics and patronage, about law enforcement, gambling, corruption, about human beings, the good and the evil, and all the things that have made these four relentless years here in Springfield the best in my life.

You would understand better then why I am so grateful for the opportunity you, the people, gave me and why I wanted so desperately to continue here in Springfield. But my party asked me to run for president, and, after preaching the gospel of public service so long, I didn’t see how I could consistently decline. The consequences are familiar to you, and acutely familiar to me now, on the eve of my return to private life!

But all that is past, and it is with the future that I shall deal. I have listed some ten major future goals for the state. They contain no sensations. In the past four years we have instituted extensive legislative and administrative changes. I am happy to say that most of the ambitious original objectives I had four years ago have now been accomplished in whole or in part. What follows are the principal things that remain to be done as I see it:

1. *Foremost is the highway program.* It must be completed as soon as possible. The tempo of that program has been set. Last year \$86 million in new contracts were awarded, not counting \$23 million of work carried over from 1951 and \$11 million contributed by the state to the Cook County super-highway development. This was more than twice as large a program as in any prior year in Illinois history.

Moreover, a sound pattern for completing this program in the next ten years has been established. Under laws enacted in 1951 the contribution to the cost of that program will be shared on a more equal basis by highway users—the private vehicle owners and the truckers. I strongly urge the legislature to resist efforts that may be made to radically disturb this fair apportionment. To jeopardize the highway program itself, or to grant special advantages or concessions to particular classes of vehicle operators, at the expense of other classes, would be a grave injustice and disservice.

2. *The urgent needs of the public schools must continue to be recognized.* The schools represent our greatest asset. Important forward strides have been taken in recent years to strengthen the schools of Illinois. To do this the legislature in 1951 appropriated in round figures \$150 million to the common schools for the current biennium. State aid has been almost doubled in my four years.

What have been the results? They cannot be measured alone in higher appropriations, but they can be measured in better facilities, better curricula, better trained teachers. The Illinois School Problems Commission surveyed 1,396 schools for the year of 1948-49 and reported that nearly one-half of the elementary schools and almost one-fourth of the high schools had to be rated “inferior.” The same schools, surveyed for the year 1951-52, showed that the number of elementary schools now falling short of the foundation program is barely one-fourth instead of one-half. The “inferior” high schools are now fewer than one-fifth. This means that thousands more Illinois children are now receiving a satisfactory instead of an inferior education.

I think the legislature might well consider the creation of a School Building Authority which could finance construction of desperately needed school buildings on a long-term revenue bond basis when local resources are insufficient.

3. *We must extend the gains in welfare services and administration.* As in the case of schools, accomplishment here cannot be measured alone in terms of dollars spent. Real progress has been made in reducing overcrowding and understaffing in the mental hospitals and correctional institutions, but they have by no means been overcome. Our threefold approach has been: Increased efforts to reduce mental disease and public dependency through research and community efforts; extension of the career service idea in the recruitment of more and better hospital personnel; and continuing enlargement of our physical facilities.

On the whole, I think nothing has pleased me more than the improved care and treatment of our unfortunate wards in these past few years and the nationwide recognition of our progress in Illinois.

4. *The state penal system must be re-examined.* Some of our prison facilities are outstandingly good, but others are not. The Menard Penitentiary presents special problems of administration due to obsolete physical plant and the illogical location there of the psychiatric division where mentally deranged criminals are kept. These problems were brought forcefully to public attention by the recent riots that endangered the lives of a number of guards.

It seems to me obvious that the psychiatric division should be moved to another location where psychiatrists and adequate facilities for the treatment of mentally ill prisoners would be more accessible. If the old prison is to be retained some of the buildings will have to be modernized and more shops and facilities provided to keep the prisoners occupied with useful work while they learn trades and skills that will help in their rehabilitation.

In that connection, consideration might well be given in Illinois to the use of the safest prisoners to do necessary work in the state parks and forests. Uncle Sam and one or two other states do it. Some such plan might eventually be extended to solve the old problem of reclaiming, through reforestation or otherwise, the thousands of acres of strip mined land that now are unsightly and largely useless.

More important to me, however, is that our penitentiary system from the wardens on down should be taken out of politics and put on a professional career basis to make it attractive to the most competent people. I have already taken steps in that direction and I hope more will follow.

5. Law enforcement must be tightened. Through increased emphasis and activity on the part of the Attorney General and the State Police, we have made conspicuous progress in law enforcement. The overweight truck laws are now being well enforced, but our gambling laws are inadequate and I again urged the General Assembly to give increased powers to the Liquor Control Commission to suspend or revoke tavern licenses where commercial gambling is permitted. Also, since we outlaw gambling, I think it would be consistent to prohibit the manufacture of slot machines and other gambling devices within the state.

Removing the State Police from politics and placing them under a merit system, which I recommended in 1949 and the legislature approved, has already paid important dividends in terms of performance and morale, and I pray that this great reform will be encouraged in letter and spirit in the future.

6. Efforts to modernize the state Constitution and the state government should continue. We must have a better judiciary and quicker justice in our courts. Our procedures for the administration of justice are over a century old and clearly outmoded. The Chicago and Illinois Bar Associations have made careful studies of this problem and their plan for modernization of the judicial structure will be presented to the General Assembly at this session.

The proposal to amend the revenue article of the Constitution, which narrowly failed of adoption in the last election, should be restudied and again submitted to the people at the earliest opportunity. The inequities and abuses of our present tax system can never be corrected until the revenue article is brought up to date.

A constitutional amendment giving a greater degree of legislative representation to Cook County's preponderance of population is long overdue. Gross inequalities in population as between the districts within the metropolitan area also must be corrected.

Many recommendations of the Commission I sponsored for reorganization of our state government have already been put into effect, but the General Assembly can accomplish more toward further efficiency and economy by favorable consideration of the remaining recommendations of this Commission.

7. Better mine safety and labor laws are needed. The new federal legislation will not, it now appears, relieve the states of their obligation to enact and enforce adequate safety regulations in the mines. Consequently the need continues for a new, up-to-date, effective code of mine safety laws. Illinois also needs a workable state minimum wage law, and a system of temporary disability insurance protecting wage earners from the loss of wages through illness.

8. The civil rights of all citizens must be steadfastly protected. Discrimination in any form on account of race, religion, or national origin is repugnant to our ideals of liberty and justice. The proper and most effective initiative in attacking discrimination, wherever it exists, rests with the states. I again express the hope that Illinois will join the other progressive states which have adopted fair employment practices laws.

9. A single board for higher education should be created. Little has been done, except in the teachers' colleges, toward the integration of our system of higher education. There is no orderly, coordinated statewide program; there is much expensive and unnecessary competition and duplication. Two years ago I was convinced that the creation of a single board for higher education, that would take the place of the three virtually autonomous boards we now have, would facilitate that process. I still think so.

10. The merit idea in personnel policies and recruitment should be extended. The efficient functioning and integrity of government depend upon attracting to public life honest, competent, loyal men and women. Of all the things I have tried to do nothing is more important than the progress we have made in bringing to and retaining in the state service capable men and women without regard to politics.

The State Civil Service has been expanded and revitalized; the State Police merit system has been established; training programs have been started in the welfare, revenue, public safety, and other departments which need trained career personnel. These are examples of what is needed to improve personnel practices and performances.

When I took office, only 53 per cent of the eligible state employees had civil service status. Today 70.3 per cent are certified. This is a major accomplishment, and it came about not through any magic formula or last-minute manipulation. It has been a slow, steady gain.

If better personnel practices are to have lasting value, this work must go on. I hope very much it will go on here in Illinois because I believe the ultimate results in terms of better service, less cost and waste, and restored public confidence will be tremendous.

Indeed, if I had my way, I would wish history to judge the total worth of my administration by what has been done in this and three other major areas of responsibility.

One of these is the highway program, which I consider the most urgent and vital of the

immediate tasks confronting the state. Another has been the dawn of a new day of recognition and state support for our public schools. The third is the positive progress which has been made in meeting the state's welfare responsibilities vigorously and intelligently.

There are many, many accomplishments of other departments and agencies. I have in mind the divorcing of the Commerce Commission, which regulates utility rates, etc., from partisan control and restoring public respect for it; closer screening of public assistance rolls to eliminate many ineligible; better salaries for state employees; reorganization of the Purchasing Division to place state buying on a strictly business basis; tightening up on abuses in the use of state cars and expense accounts.

And I could go on and on—how the revenue collection services have been improved with reduced personnel, how the Highway Division has been able to carry out its heavier work load without increase in technical staffs, how the Department of Public Health has helped build 17 community non-profit hospitals in areas where the need was greatest, with twenty-one more under construction.

I'm particularly proud of economies along the way—the weeding out of non-working political payrollers, the reduction in personnel in many departments, the saving of a million dollars a year through new highway resurfacing techniques, the saving of another half-million a year on the State Fair, and the like. Had it not been for many savings, plus various cuts in operating appropriations, we would not now enjoy our substantial treasury balance. The finance department has computed total savings and reductions in appropriations during the last four years at \$60 million, almost the exact equivalent of the general revenue fund balance.

This then is my report on the condition of the state:

Our financial position is strong, significant changes have been initiated in state government organization, the people are getting the kind of public service at the state level which they are entitled to expect. Our regulatory agencies have acquired a reputation for objectivity, competence, and freedom from influence. Public employees expect to do, and do, a full day's work for a day's pay.

There has, in short, been a brightening of the tradition of state government in Illinois. With the type of public responsibility we have sought to achieve, with a fearless facing of the people's needs and demands, we can make effective state government a reality, and thus avoid those failures of performance which so often cause public functions to move up the ladder to Washington.

Government—local, state and federal—is not something separate and apart; if it is to be good it must share the attitudes and the competence of the best in our society as a whole. Both business and government are gainers when the best among us from private life will make the sacrifice, if need be, to fill vital public positions. Illinois, where my family have lived and prospered for a century and a quarter, means a

great deal to me, and I am humbly thankful for the opportunity that has been mine to serve it. I leave my high office content in one respect—that I have given to it the best that was in me. It has been a richly rewarding experience, and the satisfactions have far outweighed the disappointments.

To the people of Illinois who have honored me so generously, and to the associates in this great undertaking whose friendship and loyalty have meant so much to me, I shall be eternally grateful.

And now, with a full heart, I bid you all good-bye.

— Adlai E. Stevenson II

Discussion Questions:

1. What is political patronage, and why did Stevenson want to move away from it?
2. Why did Stevenson consider the highway program the “most urgent and vital of the immediate tasks confronting the state”?
3. Can you name the 10 areas on which Stevenson hoped progress would continue when he left his role as governor? Choose two and describe why you think they would have been, or still are, important.

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