

Two-Term Governorship?

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Virginia’s concerns about an overly powerful chief executive have been a part of her history. As a colony Virginia experienced the abuses of executive power under King George III and Royal Governor Dunmore. Virginian Thomas Jefferson enumerated in the Declaration of Independence grievances against the executive authority felt by all the colonies. George Mason penned the Declaration of Rights, the forerunner of the Constitution’s Bill of Rights, to protect against abuses in the future in Virginia.

Under its first Constitution of 1776, the General Assembly, not the people, elected the governor for a one-year term. The governor was limited to three consecutive terms and could not be elected again until four years had passed. Patrick Henry served as Virginia’s first governor from 1776 to 1779 and again from 1784 to 1786. But no governor was ever charged with being overly powerful.

The governor’s term was lengthened to three years with the constitution of 1830 and to its current four years in the constitution of 1851. Virginia is the only state that limits the governor to one term. A governor can run for election again after being out of office for one term. Mills Godwin served as governor from 1966 to 1970 as a Democrat and from 1974 to 1978 as a Republican.

Governor Mark Warner has announced his support of a two-term governor for the Commonwealth as part of a reform package for state government. An amendment to the constitution would be required. Such an amendment could be passed by the General Assembly in 2003, passed a required second time in 2004 and be put to the voters in November 2004. Warner’s proposal would not apply to him as it would not be effective until 2009.

Constitutional amendments have been introduced in the past to allow the governor to run for a second term, and I have always voted for them whenever they got out of committee. I will vote for an amendment this year.

Virginia’s programs and services to its citizens have suffered from the jolts and starts of changing governors every four years. Voters could continue to limit ineffective governors to one term by simply not voting to re-elect them. But effective governors would have the opportunity to assert responsible leadership over a reasonable timeframe.

And the two-term possibility would give the governor a broader vision of leadership and would eliminate some of the mischief that now occurs. Governor Allen proposed a massive billion-dollar tax cut for which he wanted the credit for passing but for which the next governor would have the responsibility for funding. Fortunately the legislature rejected his scheme. The big bill for Governor Gilmore’s car tax cut did not come due until he left office, and now the state is staggering under the burden of trying to meet it.

Another example of Virginia needing to get past its history is reflected in this issue. We need a governor with enough power—and time—to effectively serve the citizens of the Commonwealth.