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The Hard Lessons of Governing

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Republicans assumed control of the Virginia General Assembly a little over two years ago and in that short time have found that governing is much more difficult than campaigning. Turning a political slogan into responsible public policy is a challenging task.

Last year there was the budget debacle when House Republicans sided with Governor Gilmore against Senate Republicans over car tax and spending issues, and the General Assembly adjourned for the first time ever in its history without a new budget. The repercussions of that failure were felt mightily this year as deeper cuts needed to be made in spending to make up for the lack of adjustments last year.

And a little over a week ago there was the historic first of the House of Delegates adjourning abruptly to prevent debate and voting on the sales tax referendum for Northern Virginia's transportation and school needs. Much to the chagrin of the Speaker of the House and the majority leader a coalition of moderate Republicans with all but a couple of Democrats were on the verge of passing Northern Virginia's highest legislative priority. The Speaker used all his power and intimidation to get the House to adjourn even though the more moderate Senate had already passed the sales tax measure.

Last week the partisanship of last year's redistricting caught up with the Republicans. A circuit court judge found the redistricting of the House and Senate to be unconstitutional. For many, the decision was no surprise. It was obvious that African Americans in the Hampton Roads area were stuffed into as few legislative districts as possible in order to dilute their voting strength. And consequently Democratic Party strength. In a well-reasoned, highly documented opinion of more than 50 pages, the judge detailed the unconstitutional aspects of the redistricting. Now the Republican legislature will need to re-do the job. Only this time there will be a Democratic governor who must sign the bill; that should cut down on the partisan tricks. All members of the House of Delegates will have to run again this year as well as next year because of the fumbling of the job by the House of Delegates leadership.

Attorney General Jerry Kilgore has refused to meet with Governor Mark Warner to discuss any appeals of the redistricting case. Kilgore can be expected to try to protect his partisan allies in the legislature, and Warner may well agree with the judge's ruling. Neither Kilgore nor Warner have held elective office before and now they must resolve a major dispute on the public stage.

The problem is more ideological than partisan. Just as ultra-conservative Democrats kept Virginia a segregated state with limited investments in education and infrastructure for decades, the ultra-conservatives controlling the state Republican Party are pushing a strong social agenda with harsh partisan overtones. The people of the state will be the losers unless the moderates of both parties are able to resume power.