



President Obama's Speech at Michigan: Government and Civility

Author : Mike Smith

Categories : [Public Service](#)

Date : May 2, 2010



Graduation season is here, and it means more and more speeches that no one will remember. In her [commencement speech at Harvard](#) a couple of years ago, J.K. Rowling started by saying that she thought giving a graduation speech was a great responsibility until she reflected back on her own commencement and realized she couldn't remember a single word of the speech. (In addition to the honor, she also thanked Harvard for creating a level of stress that caused her to lose weight.) When I graduated from Michigan the speaker was Kingman Brewster, the President of Yale University. I have absolutely no idea what he talked about.

On Saturday [President Obama gave the commencement address at the University of Michigan](#). It may not go down in history as one of his more memorable speeches, but he focused on issues important to anyone who cares about government—the role of government and the need for greater civility in our public debate. The president pointed out that “politics has never been a particularly nice business—and it’s always been a little less gentle during times of great change.” For example, he quoted a newspaper editorial of the period claiming that if Thomas Jefferson were



elected “[m]urder, robbery, rape, adultery, and incest will be openly taught and practiced.” Too often people talk as if the lack of civility in government is a new development. I’m glad that President Obama offered some much-needed perspective.

He pointed out that we have debated the role of government from the earliest days of our country, but that nearly everyone “recognized the need for a government that, while limited, can still help us adapt to a changing world.” Leaders from both political parties have long recognized that “some things we can only do together” with the help of government. Unfortunately, too many people now are saying “that all of government is inherently bad.” (He described the ironic extreme reflected in one of his favorite protest signs from the health care debate: “Keep Government Out of My Medicare.”) “[W]hat we should be asking is not whether we need a ‘big government’ or a ‘small government,’ according to President Obama, “but how we can create a smarter, better government.” “[T]he ability for us to adapt our government to the needs of the age has helped make our democracy work since its inception.” That sounds to me like work for the School of Government.

The other theme of the speech was that the “way to keep our democracy healthy is to maintain a basic level of civility in our public debate.” The “twenty-four seven echo chamber” of blogs and cable news produces “vilification and over-the-top rhetoric [that] closes the door to the possibility of compromise. It undermines democratic deliberation.” President Obama argued that if we “actively seek out information that challenges our assumptions and our beliefs, perhaps we can begin to understand where the people who disagree with us are coming from.” Along with participation, “the practice of listening to opposing views is essential for effective citizenship.”

What is the School’s role in responding to the important issues raised by President Obama? Our Civic Education Consortium promotes effective citizenship, and a number of our colleagues are working to help citizens bridge their differences and address state and local policy issues. John Stephens and Rick Morse are working in complementary ways on collaborative governance, and Lydian Altman, Margaret Henderson, and Gordon Whitaker are using appreciative inquiry to help people address challenges by emphasizing strengths rather than weaknesses. Everyone at the School is doing work that can be described as trying to create “a smarter, better government.”

One of our strategic planning implementation committees is looking at how we can do more to help public policy decision-makers. I encourage you to watch [or read](#) President Obama’s speech.

The School’s mission is aligned with the fundamental issues that he identified as crucial to the future of our country. That’s pretty cool. I’d love to hear your thoughts about the School’s role in helping people understand the necessary role of government and the need for greater civility and participation in government.