

Opening Day of the 74th Legislative Assembly
January 8, 2007

Speech by Senate President Peter Courtney
Senate Chamber

Thank you, my fellow senators. I am humbled by your vote. Given the time, you might be encouraged to learn that I will shorten my words.

This is a day of happiness, a day of joy and a day of celebration. But it also is a day of sadness, a day of loneliness and a day of heartbreak. All of us have very important people in our lives that have helped us along the way and it is on a day like this that we wish they could be here. But life does not permit that. While today is a good day, I know that each one of us in our own way will think about a loved one, a lost one, that we wish could be here. In particular, we need to keep in our thoughts and perhaps say something privately to three of our members who carry a heavy cross today. A father, a mother and a spouse are not here today. Senator Brown's dad, Senator Johnson's mom, Senator Verger's husband are not here today. This day, this moment, we are all brothers and sisters. So, while we laugh and smile today and feel good, please remember those who carry a cross. While they may also smile and even laugh at times, they are suffering.

I want to thank you for being willing to serve in the state legislature. Your families also deserve much thanks. Together, you put your lives on hold, you sacrifice more lucrative pursuits, you sacrifice your privacy and, most of all, you sacrifice precious time with each other, all to serve this great state.

I need to thank my staff that puts up with me and works so very hard to provide the services for the president's office—Connie, Brian, Margie, Debbie, Tanya, James and Joe.

Up here, to give me the oath of office, was my wife Margie. She is the first person I met when I came to this state on July 9, 1969, all by myself, a single suitcase, not knowing anyone. Margie Ann Brenden Courtney was a little girl from Mt. Angel and she did not know what to make of me. I'm sure today, she still does not.

Today, the Bible was held by our youngest son, Adam. His older brother, Sean, is starting his second semester of his second year at Carroll College in Helena, Montana, and could not be here. Our eldest son, Peter Vincent, is managing the Enterprise office in Woodburn. Our family is small but I think it is a good little family.

This is the beginning of a session but so much work goes into getting us here. Judy Hall and her worker bees are responsible for all that you see here. Dave Henderson and his troops handled all the mechanical things, all the offices, all the equipment. Ann Boss and her attorneys have been working tirelessly to develop all those bill drafts and continue to work during this ceremony. Ken Rocco and his accountants have had their eagle eyes on the Governor's budget long before December 1. Paul Warner and his economists are trying to figure out ways to pay for what we decide to do and buy. And your personal staff, like ants, has been crawling all over this building getting your offices ready.

It takes a team; it takes a whole lot of teams working 24/7 to get us to this day to get us through this mission we are on. We thank you one and all.

Back in 1859, when our great state was founded, our population was 52,465, people, there were 18 counties and 7 cities and there were 38,670 students between age 4 and 20. We had 22 judges and the state budget was \$72,545. And there were 16 state senators. Back then, there were 3,279 Oregonians for every state senator. The Senate would become 30 senators in 1872. We may be one of the smallest chambers in the country.

Today, 148 years later, Oregon has changed. The population is 3.6 million people. There are 36 counties, 241 cities, 559,244 K-12 students and 198 school districts. There are 187 judges and our state budget—all funds co-chairs, "budgeteers"—is \$49.2 billion.

And, just as in 1872, we are still 30 state senators. That averages out to about 121,369 Oregonians for each one of us.

Since 1872, through 67 biennial sessions and 34 special sessions, for 135 years, this Senate has remained constant at 30 members. We are small, but we are huge in our responsibilities and obligations to help Oregon find her way.

Our task is daunting: balance the budget, address mental health, health care, education, public safety and do all this with an eye to the recommendations of our Public Commission on the Oregon Legislature and do all this within a strict new, bold timeline, while raising the ethical standards of government and pioneering a legislative structure that has never been tried before.

We are talented. We are first. We are veteran. We are teachers, doctors, nurses, veterinarians, farmers, parents, military veterans, counselors, economists and, yes, even some of us are lawyers.

We have many firsts. Some of us are first in our families to go to college, first to be elected to public office, first female majority leader, first female African-American President Pro Tempore, first female mayor of her city.

And we are veteran. Our average age is 56 years and I feel every single year of it. We are veterans in making policy. We have served on City Councils, as mayors, on school boards, police commissions, planning commissions, parks committees, port commissions, soil and water conservation districts, transportation commissions, on Metro. And we have served in the House and in the Senate. In this chamber today, is 279 years of collective experience.

Our mission is difficult. We have so much to do and so short the time, so new, so unfamiliar, so untested is our legislative path. That sounds very much like the Oregon way.

The first wagon on the Oregon Trail had no trail to follow, no guide to lead them. They had to beat the fierce winter. You know what their number was? Thirty. The first ones that came to this state were 30. Just like us. And they made it. My fellow senators, I believe, with our pioneering spirit, our vast experience, our respect for history and, most of all, our love of Oregon, we will too.

Thank you.