

You Might Be Right - Polarization in Government - Transcript

Marianne Wanamaker: Welcome to "You Might Be Right", a place for civil conversations about tough topics brought to you by the Baker School of Public Policy and Public Affairs at the University of Tennessee, with funding support from members of our Producers Circle. To learn more about how you can support our work, visit youmightberight.org.

While political polarization is most visible in Congress, it affects the branches of the federal government in different ways. In this episode, our hosts, former Tennessee Governors Phil Bredesen and Bill Haslam, speak with Anthony Foxx, former Secretary of Transportation under President Obama, and Margaret Spellings, former Secretary of Education under President Bush, about their experiences navigating division and disagreement while in office, and what they see today. How does polarization affect governing? And what reforms could help facilitate more productive problem solving?

This episode was recorded live at Davidson College in September 2024.

Bill Haslam: Phil, it's fun to be here in front of a live audience. Thank you all for coming. We think this is a special treat for folks who have all gotten to serve the public and actually in multiple roles, and so I think it's a great chance to talk about the polarization challenge and what it practically means for the people that we want to try to serve.

Phil Bredesen: We've got some great guests for this podcast, and I'd like to just move on directly with some introductions and start the discussion.

I'd like to introduce, first of all, Margaret Spellings. Secretary Spellings is the president and the CEO of the Bipartisan Policy Center, at the moment, in Washington. She served as the U.S. Secretary of Education from 2005 to 2009. That's the second term of the George W. Bush administration. During that time, one of the things I remember about it particularly was her convening of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education, which has had an enormous influence in thinking about that particular subject.

From 2015 to 2019, she served as president of the University of North Carolina system, and many of you may know her from that. She served as CEO of Texas 2036 for a while until she came to the Bipartisan Policy Commission just recently. And most importantly for this evening, Secretary Spellings has a daughter who is a student right here.

Margaret Spellings: Go Cats.

Bill Haslam: So she's invested, so to speak.

Margaret Spellings: Yeah.

Bill Haslam: Hey, it's great to have— I'm not certain why I'm introducing you here since you're

literally a son of this school, but Anthony Foxx is now the Emma Bloomberg Professor of the Practice of Public Leadership at Harvard University. He previously was the 17th U.S. Secretary of Transportation. One of the fun things about this is Margaret and I are the two Republicans, Phil and Anthony are the two Democrats, but it was actually Anthony and I that served together while he was in the Obama administration, and Phil and Margaret worked together when they were in office at the same time. So there's a lot of great linkage here.

But prior to this tenure at the U.S. Department of Transportation, he was the mayor of Charlotte. He was the city's 54th mayor and the youngest in history. How old were you when you got elected?

Anthony Foxx: 38.

Bill Haslam: Wow, okay. He departed his post at Transportation 2017, worked for Lyft as the chief policy officer. Probably lots of learning there. And then you've heard him as a commentator on everything from Fox to CNN to CBS Morning, MSNBC, et cetera. In addition to his duties at the Kennedy School, he chairs the U.S. Department of Transportation Advisory Committee on Transportation Equity. He was born in Charlotte. He has attended Davidson College, was the very first black student body president in 1993. He claims that when this was a gym, he hit a lot of jump shots here. We have zero video proof of that though. Anyway, thank you. He went on to get his JD at the NYU School of Law.

So let's get rolling.

All right. Let me ask the first question, and you can both jump in at this. You both have served in the federal government, but in local government and state government as well. Polarization of the country is almost a cliché it gets talked about now, but tell us in practical terms, what's that look like? Where do you see and feel it in terms of, forget about whether your side is winning, but in terms of actually delivering the service, providing better education, better roads and transportation systems? What's it look like when the partisanship and polarization invades the real work you're trying to do.

Margaret, go first.

Margaret Spellings: Well, in Washington it means inertia. It means nothing happens except when we get to the end of the cliff and we're at one now whether the government is going to continue to operate past the end of this month or not, and then folks have to spring into action in a crisis management sort of operation. And we've been doing that for too long. So regular order and regular discussions and debates and amendment processes and the grinding through of issues doesn't happen like it's supposed to anymore. And we'll get into this, I know, but nothing is happening in Washington until it's an emergency situation to raise the debt ceiling, to keep the government open, to have aid to Israel and Ukraine, et cetera. At the state level, the state governments have to work, they have to balance budgets. So again, the question is ultimately called and that tends to work a little better.

Anthony Foxx: I felt the same way about the federal government. Actually, there's fairly strong bipartisan consensus usually on infrastructure questions like roads and things like that, but it gets more partisan when the question is how do you pay for it? And that starts to create some fissures in Washington, D.C., based on my experience. At the local level, the dynamics that I felt were more state local dynamics where the state government would sometimes take a very hard line position on local issues and it would create friction between local government.

In Charlotte, for example, as I was leaving to go to the Department of Transportation there was an effort to— we called it a takeover of the Charlotte Airport, and that was seen as a very partisan act by the legislature. So that's the way that I see the polarization at the local level.

Phil Bredezen: I want to ask specifically, Margaret, from something you said, during your watch, No Child Left Behind was a signature accomplishment that you were involved with right up to there. As I remember, that had pretty broad bipartisan support in the Congress. I'm curious how that was engineered. What was it about that program that allowed that kind of consensus rather than the much narrower thing like the Affordable Care Act a decade later?

Margaret Spellings: Well, thank you for asking that. And I'm a Texas braggadocio, so I'll try not to go on too long about how that came to be because at the end of the day, that law passed the United States Senate 87 to 10, and in the house like 410 to 30 or something like that. Massive bipartisanship. And I don't think they can pass a motion to adjourn by a margin like that these days. How did that happen? Remember the days when our presidential campaigns had a lot of policy discussions and white papers and debates, and this sort of thing? And so there was a real socializing of the policy on the campaign trail.

Phil Bredezen: It's kind of a fading memory now, but I guess—

Margaret Spellings: I know. These young people in the audience probably can't remember anything like this, but it was part of the campaign and then obviously it was part of President Bush's first thing that he worked on. Little did we know that the pace of Washington was supposed to move so slowly, and so we worked, immediately cultivated Ted Kennedy, who was a key, the lion of the Senate, the mastermind of how you pass legislation and made friends with him and cultivated those relationships week after week – movies, visiting schools together. Just cultivating friendships and conversations.

And then we got a good bit of the way through the summer and things had gridlocked. And then 9/11 happened. And in the aftermath of that tragedy, there was a lot of comedy and goodwill and good feeling that we needed to come together and demonstrate to the American people we could do something. And so by the end of the year, the law had passed by those margins, and the guts of it are still on the books today. Amen.

Bill Haslam: Anthony, you took over in President Obama's second term, right?

Anthony Foxx: That's correct.

Bill Haslam: So, by then, like I said, the polarization partisanship continues to heat up. I was in office then. I think they were better than they are now, but they weren't lovey-dovey by any means. Can you tell us a time when you were, like you said, infrastructure has some bipartisan support, some things you were able to accomplish that did require a bipartisan effort, and how did it happen and could it happen today?

Anthony Foxx: Yeah. The thing I think about is the transportation bill we were able to get done in 2015. It's like small potatoes next to the bipartisan infrastructure law today. But at the time, it seemed almost impossible that we would actually figure out how to get a bipartisan transportation highway bill passed and a pay for. But what we did was we basically barnstormed the country. We went to "red and blue districts" all across the country. I remember going to Janesville, Wisconsin, where Paul Ryan is from, down to Kentucky where Mitch McConnell is from. And we—

Bill Haslam: Were they with you while you were barn— I mean, when you showed up at Janesville was Paul there and did Mitch show up in Louisville or wherever you were?

Anthony Foxx: Paul didn't and Mitch didn't, but we did have Republicans show up along the way. We had some Democrats show up along the way. But the main thing is we were going to the public and we were basically making the case that we've got to do something about our infrastructure. That built a bit of a groundswell. And I had one of my proudest moments on December 4th, 2015, when President Obama signed this bill. It was the Barbara Boxer, Mitch McConnell Bill that passed.

Maybe some of you are too young to remember who some of these people are, but Barbara Boxer was a very liberal Democrat from California, and Mitch McConnell obviously is the leader of the Senate. I called Senator McConnell and thanked him for coming through on that and it was one of my proudest moments.

Phil Bredezen: Also, Anthony, just a followup, you served as a mayor. To what extent had the partisanship and the difficulties that seemed to originate in Washington, to what extent had that penetrated down to these local offices which had typically been insulated from that? Were you starting to see it in your job as mayor?

Anthony Foxx: I was starting to see it when I became mayor, and I think part of it is in maybe an earlier period of time, local government really wasn't seen as a pathway to something down the road. But as time has gone on and as Charlotte has become bigger, and many cities like Nashville and other places around the country have gotten bigger, people see this as a launching pad to something else. And so a lot of times issues that are in the news nationally or even at the state level, come down to the city level and people try to use issues to catapult themselves forward. So I do think it has bled into local government more.

Bill Haslam: One of the things I think that we see today is it's really hard to get anything done at all in Congress. And our Congress folks think that their job maybe is to go on a cable show and talk to people who think just like they do, instead of to negotiate with the other side. Because negotiations become a dirty word in politics. Compromise has become a dirty word. And the result of that, I think, is that the executive branch has actually gained power because Congress is almost saying, "We don't want to do the hard stuff. You decide what you're going to do about student debt or how you're going to pay to build a wall," or whatever it is that the president wants to do. I'm curious, you all both served in the executive branch. Is that a good thing or a bad thing?

Margaret Spellings: Well, first let me say, because I don't want people leaving here thinking everybody is a dodo in Washington and nobody is working together because it's not true. Things take a long time and the whole thesis for the Bipartisan Policy Center is to bring people together on things that can get done. And the Bipartisan Policy Center was founded by four Senate majority leaders, including the beloved former senator Leader Baker. So I just want to draw that in. And we work with folks like that all the time on paid leave, on childcare, and housing and so forth. And so there's a lot of energy under the hood. Things take a long time and then we'll get there.

But you're right, the people who are getting the attention are the— Well, we can name their names on both sides of the aisle. So I just want to put that over there. But as former regulators, and I'll just start, it's a blessing and a curse. The blessing is, "Man, I got the mantle here. I'm the queen." And so you can run the tables on intent, and record, and signaling through guidance and all manner of mechanisms, how you want something implemented when the Congress has failed to do its job and left that blank opening. Time marches on. And so that's good.

The bad news is – well, can be good? The bad news is obviously all the accountability flows to you for those decisions. It's a singular exercise. But the other thing is then you're subject to litigation on why did you decide that? What was the record? Are the resources? Have you moved this to pay for that? And so on. So it's a real slippery slope. And why? We'll get into this post-Chevron Loper Bright world. The Congress has got to get back to regular order in doing their job.

Anthony Foxx: Yeah, I agree with that. And also I think about earmarks when I think about your question, which were abandoned very early in the Obama period. And actually, as detestable as some of the earmarks might have been, it actually greased the wheels for getting some things done across the country and provided a basis on which members would actually talk to each other about things they needed.

What happened in the absence of that is Congress created a bunch of grant programs that were handed effectively over to the administration. And so we were giving billions of dollars away using an executive process to do it, but it didn't actually have the same effect that earmarks had before.

Bill Haslam: You mentioned the Chevron decision, which basically said everything that you talked about doing in terms of putting regulations in place, et cetera, that weren't in law, that the departments didn't have the – I'm way over simplifying the decision but – didn't have the power to do that anymore. I'm curious, let me ask both of you – Anthony, let me ask you first – is that a good thing or a bad thing?

Anthony Foxx: Oh, I think we're in for a long period of significant disruption in how regulations are promulgated. One of the first ones I did was the rear camera rule for cars. Now, that you have the rearview camera in your cars to prevent people from rolling over kids and various things, that was a regulation and it was done under the discretion of the Department of Transportation. I think, based on the Chevron decision, many ordinary practices that agencies like USDOT did to promulgate rules such as that will now be in question.

And now the court is saying that the executive branch doesn't have the authority to craft these rules unless Congress has given explicit authority and the courts now have the power to interpret Congress's statutes as well as decide on some of these rules. So it just seems like we're taking it out of the hands of the agencies that have the knowledge, the expertise, the talent. I just worry that we're going to be deconstructing a lot of rules that have been built up over time, and I have no idea how it's going to go going forward in terms of how we manage these cases. I don't know.

Margaret?

Margaret Spellings: So that's one scenario and I want to add that and the ability to respond timely in this mix. So we have two sides of the pancakes, what Anthony has said, and in so doing tons of uncertainty, courts all over the country contradicting each other, some saying it's okay, some not. A business climate that is going to be just wildly uncertain. Or – and this is what we at BBC are working on. We're just about to name a bipartisan co-chaired effort of jurists and lawyers, and former members of Congress and so forth – the Congress is going to step into the breach and do their job. Create a record, create regular order, create amendment processes where things are litigated, debated, failed, passed, and there's creating that intent and so forth.

They're either going to do that or they're going to give expressly the authority to do a regulation on rear cameras to the Department of Transportation. They could also do that. The other thing that is a possibility, and people are talking about in Washington is, might vest, as they do with the Congressional Budget Office or other pieces of the Congressional apparatus, a check along the way for the Congress to say, "Yeah, we mean this. We don't mean that."

So there are some ways to skin the cat, but either we're going to have lots of uncertainty and chaos, and whatnot, or the Congress is going to have to figure out a way to do their job. And so whether you're on the Trump campaign talking about the administrative state, the alternative is Congress has got to do their job.

Phil Bredeesen: Just to follow up on the Chevron issue a little bit. During my first term as governor, I was totally consumed with a Medicaid system which had a lot of problems, trying to sort through things. I don't think it was the right thing to do, but some sympathy for what people were thinking with the Chevron decision because it seemed to me that there were a lot of things being determined by people at HHS, in this case, who I thought expertise is fine, but I don't really think they knew what they were doing. Have you described a sort of a center lane here maybe where the Congress takes some more responsibility for setting these things up, particularly when there's just value judgments involved, but still leaves some kinds of things to be able to grease the wheels and make rules and so on? Is that a solution?

Margaret Spellings: Yeah, I think there's a pony in there somewhere, but you're right in the health field, Medicare, Medicaid, those sorts of things, some people got that joke, but not everyone.

Bill Haslam: They either be from Texas or know someone from Texas.

Margaret Spellings: Yeah, exactly. Anyway, the point is there, there's so much discretion in that piece because of reimbursement rates and the money and so forth that it's so complex and there's been a big brain drain in the Congress around the staff. So by default that's happened. But I really agree with you. It's a lot.

Phil Bredeesen: What kind of effect does it have in transportation, these things? Are the things that you can see now that are going to be very problematical?

Anthony Foxx: Yeah. Well, one thing is driverless cars. We're starting to see driverless cars on the streets of San Francisco and parts of Arizona, in other states. And the federal government is more or less silent on what should happen regarding the safety of these vehicles. When you go to DMV to get your driver's license, that's the state using its power to validate that you know how to operate a car. Now, we have cars that are operating off of software and there's a danger that we end up with 50 different variations of standards that come up as a result of that.

So there are places where I think the federal government can actually play an accelerant role or an assistive role in helping to get things in place so that driverless cars and other new technologies can come into being. But again, this relies on Congress to explicitly state that the DOT has this authority, and it also requires the DOT to use the Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards to help craft rules to say what is a safe operating software for these cars? That's just one example.

Bill Haslam: Margaret, you're at the Bipartisan Policy Center. Anthony, you're teaching at Harvard. Give us some ideas that you all have from your own experience, local, state, federal government, here's some things we can do to address the current problem situation. Like I said, it's talked about so much, it's almost a cliché. What can we do differently that will result in better government?

Anthony Foxx: It's a big question and I think about it every single day. And I think about this a lot with the students that I teach. I think we, first of all, as Americans, I think we underestimate the degree to which our similarities are much greater than our differences. And to some extent, the discussions that we have about polarization in some ways are a self-fulfilling prophecy because we focus on the thing that we're talking about even though in the big scheme of things, I think people in their day-to-day lives deal with all sorts of people who are coming from all different perspectives and backgrounds and things.

So I think we have to start there. But I also think that one of the things that you two gentlemen have been doing so well in proving is that a relationship makes all the difference and knowledge of how to analyze policy doesn't override being a human being and learning how to connect with people, even people who seem different than you are or have different ideas than you do. And so I think that is a fundamental skill that we have to begin really instilling in students so that they understand that as a public policy-interested person, you have to also believe that the connection between people can be strong enough to overcome differences.

Phil Bredezen: I'd like to ask, you've both talked about something you had to implement that in fact had broad bipartisan support, No Child Left Behind. You talked about the infrastructure bill, the road bill that you had done. Was there anything either of you had in your experience that wasn't like that? That it was something that was a very narrowly and partisan decided law that you had responsibility for implementing and had to navigate the political trickeries of that?

Margaret Spellings: Well, an ongoing saga, and it was true in 2000 and true today, is the Congress's angst around the District of Columbia. And some of the issues you were talking about in the city level about voting rights in D.C. or needle exchange programs. I mean, you name it. So that whole tension between the federal government and the District of Columbia, whether it is a federal district or a governed city in its own right. So that's one that continues to crop up.

Anthony Foxx: Yeah. I mean, I remember when we were going to try to get this bill passed that I talked about, I met with everybody I could find, including Grover Norquist and I had a nice breakfast and he said to me, "It's real simple. Roads are for Republicans and transit are for Democrats, and that's like the basic dividing line." And I said, "Ooh, that's new. I just used the road to get here." But I think those perceptions start to weigh into how people think about things. And one of the things that I tried to do as secretary was I wanted to see transit in areas that were more Republican and I wanted to build more investment in the overall system by making sure it existed in many more places than had before, believing that if people could see it as infrastructure, as useful infrastructure, that we could get away from some of these perceptions.

Margaret Spellings: Bill, I just want to come quickly about the question you asked about what we can do to change some of this. And I think we have to be a lot better consumers of what we see and hear and call on our elected officials and ask them about, not pets or values or whatever du jour, but ask them about, "Hey, what do you think about workforce readiness? Or what do you think about the overdue farm bill?" Or we need to up the accountability and ask the

right questions for our members.

They're going to feed the beast, whatever the beast is, if it's cable news talk, that'll be the things that they're paying attention to. But when we start being better consumers of those meat and potatoes issues like you've talked about, Anthony, I think we'll do better.

Bill Haslam: So I'm certain when you came in as the youngest transportation secretary ever, there were people saying, "The Republicans are the bad guys. They're going to try to kill everything we're doing. I've been around longer than you. Let me tell you how this world works." And you came in as education secretary, folks were saying, "The Democrats are controlled by the teacher's unions. We need to box them out or they're going to influence in all the wrong ways." How do you get past you're new, all the advisors are speaking in your ear saying, "We got to beat them and we need to get to the right answer." So how do you get from we got to beat the other side to how do we get to the right answer? And what did you do in those situations?

Margaret Spellings: I'll just say quickly because it's a simple answer. You got to create the right kind of coalition and constituency, create the demand side for that kind of policy. And in our case, it was get the business and civil rights communities together on better performing schools around federal dollars, which is largely a civil rights mandate. That's why it was created in the first place, Title IX, IDA, et cetera, and create the coalition and the demand side for change.

Anthony Foxx: I also think you have to— There's also a timing issue because there are— In a campaign, we're in a campaign season right now, so everybody is off to their sides, arguing their positions on various things. There comes a point in an issue, in the arc of an issue where something has to be done, debt ceiling is a good example. And at that point, no one is going to get a hundred percent of what they want. You have to figure out how to slice and dice things. And I think part of the problem is that the advocacy community gets really dug in. And I think sometimes even when you step into one of these agencies, I didn't bring a cavalcade of people with me from North Carolina who understood my politics. I came in and inherited people who had been around Washington and they had their own views about how you manage a divisive issue.

And I had to sort of step on my own team sometimes to say, "You know what? I'm going to go do this ribbon cutting with a Republican representative. I'm going to go put investments into rural Mississippi to do X, Y, or Z thing." And you just have to not be afraid to do those things.

Phil Bredezen: This question is a little bit out of the blue for you, but Bill and I are both now retired politicians.

Bill Haslam: Recovering.

Phil Bredezen: Recovering, yeah. It's not regretful though. Not regretful. Suppose the president called one of us up and asked us to be secretary of something or other. We got an opening up

here and you seem like you're available and would know something about this. That's a very different job from being governor or being mayor. And now that I know both of you, I might call both of you up and say, "Look, I'm thinking about taking this." What's your advice to me? Just as someone has served in that office, what's the most important one or two things I need to remember when I walk into that office so I can be successful? What would you tell me?

Anthony Foxx: I would say bring a few friends with you because there's a famous statement about Washington, "If you want a friend, get a dog." And I think there's some truth to that. The other advice I would give is get a commitment from the president you serve to decide questions that involve your subject matter only when you're in the room or at least have an opportunity to influence that decision, because otherwise the White House can operate as its own entity. And sometimes decisions can get made about your subject matter without you having a whole lot of input. And unless you establish that very early, it can get away from you.

Bill Haslam: And, Margaret, before you answer, I want to follow up on that because the tales are legend that a secretary is trying to do something and there's a young political aide in the White House who goes, "That's fine, but we're not going to do what the secretary is talking about with transportation." So how'd you combat that? I mean, the stories are legion about – and Margaret, you can answer that both questions later.

Anthony Foxx: Yeah, it's first of all, if you have a good relationship with the president, a lot of times you can override those types of things. But secondly, you also need to have someone in a very senior role who can step on those White House staff people when–

Bill Haslam: Senior role in the White House or–

Anthony Foxx: In the White House, in the White House, yes.

Bill Haslam: You got to have a friend in the White House, somebody in there.

Anthony Foxx: You need a friend, yes. James Taylor, you need a friend.

Margaret Spellings: You need a dog and a friend.

Bill Haslam: I want you to ask this too. If you needed to, could you call President Obama and say, "I know I'm not on your schedule, but I need to talk"?

Anthony Foxx: Yes. I could do it, but then there'd be three other people trying to figure out how to not make that meeting happen.

Bill Haslam: You have about three questions to answer now, Margaret.

Margaret Spellings: Okay. All right. Well, I would ask how well you knew the president, what your relationship was with him or her, and if you understood his or her priorities, his priorities, if

you will, heretofore. And what is your mandate? Do you have the authority to go execute? So that's just tantamount.

I'm going to tell a quick story about, yes, I could call the president. I had come with him from Texas. I knew him really well. All of that. All these same dynamics, the enterprise can take over. But I'll never forget, there was a budget one year, at the president's budget, which I used to call the one-day budget, that we were negotiating with OMB. And there's an arbitration board that was the vice president, the head of the OMB, and the chief of staff.

So Dick Cheney, Mitch Daniels, and Josh Bolton. And I was disputing something – I've never told this story in a forum like this – at the funding level that OMB had prescribed for the Department of Education. So I asked for an audience before this tribunal, and I'll never forget going in there and Cheney said, "Margaret, you know there's a risk that it goes the other direction." And I said, "Yes, sir." Anyway, I got the money. But the point is you have to call the question and you have to have the confidence and courage to say, "Yeah, I'm going to walk to the end of the line," because I'm going to call the president if I need to, but you can't do it every day.

Bill Haslam: And same question, if you felt like there was somebody that for political reasons inside the White House was boxing you out, so to speak, what would you do? Same question I asked Anthony, what'd you do?

Margaret Spellings: Find another way in.

Phil Bredezen: That's right.

Margaret Spellings: I mean, obviously, sometime you lay down your sword and you say, "I'm going to live to find another day, or this doesn't matter that much to me." But this is the thing about back to the relationship with your principal is you know their heart. It's not about you. It's about you're there to try to execute his vision. And so if you feel that strongly, then you can find another way and make your case to the chief of staff to whoever.

Anthony Foxx: I just want to add to that because I think it's exactly right. You really have to recognize that most people who run for president really care about solving America's problems, and they are sophisticated in the way they think about those problems. And sometimes the White House has a tendency to play checkers with these issues, and it's relatively–

Bill Haslam: Checkers or chess?

Anthony Foxx: It's definitely not chess. Definitely not chess a lot of times. And sometimes you need to have the principal step in and say, "You know what? On this issue, I care about it, and we've got to go a different way than maybe even how the checkers board, which suggested it go." And the staff will take a lot of power if that vacuum is not filled otherwise.

Bill Haslam: Well, let me ask this. I'm hoping there's some students here that are thinking, "I want to be in public service," whether it's locals. And I'm confident too that to a person, all four of us would really encourage you to do that. But I think you'd also say the Bible says the king should count the cost before he goes into battle. What's the cost that folks should think about if they're thinking about being in public service? Like I said, all of us, I promise you, would say do it. But you should also think about it, count the cost. What's the cost you would tell people to think about?

Anthony Foxx: Well, first of all, your life is public property. And I think that's probably the biggest cost. And it sort of rolls down to not only yourself, but your spouse, your partner, your children. Everybody is in it when you're in it. And the second thing I would say in terms of the cost is when I was in public service, I was watching a lot of my friends who were still in the private sector continuing in their careers financially, et cetera. And their elevator was going up and I felt like sometimes mine was going down, but at the same time, you have an opportunity to make an impact on so many important consequential issues and questions that I think in the whole, it balances out. And of course I feel good about what I did, which is probably the most important thing.

Margaret Spellings: Yeah, I agree with that heartily. But there's also times when you're going to make a tough decision and you're not going to make everybody happy. In fact, that's mostly the case. I'll never forget settling a lawsuit on a school finance issue that the record for the Department of Education was not good. And so we awarded a large sum to this particular company accordingly, and there were a lot of slings and arrows from the hill about it. But the record was there, and you just have to call the question and suffer the slings and arrows when you make a tough call. Sometimes those stick and sometimes not.

Phil Bredesen: So, Bill, I thought that was a really good question. Let me turn it back on you. You were mayor and you were governor. You didn't have to do either of those. You've got a perfectly fine life outside of that. What was the cost to you?

Bill Haslam: Well, first of all, again, I loved being a mayor. I loved being a governor. There's not a better job in the world than being governor of your home state, okay? There's just not. I'm biased, but it's the best job in the world, but the visibility and vulnerability you talk about is true. And you got to remember, if you win an election 55 to 45, that still means almost half of the— I mean, 10 points is a landslide, but it means almost half of the people didn't want you. And you get used to going out there and realizing, "Yeah, they don't think I should be in this job." And you got to get used to that.

Here's the other thing that people don't talk about much. There's a lot of times as a leader the rest of the story, but you can't tell it and the story might make you look bad. We had a huge economic development prospect that was talking about moving a business to Tennessee. It was all very public and they were the bride at the altar. We were just about to get them to come to Tennessee, and then they went somewhere else. And the theory was they went somewhere else because we didn't provide them the right infrastructure.

I knew the story was they had a major issue with that locality in the workforce preparation there. I'll just put it that way, but I couldn't go say that. I mean, I'm getting beat up all over the media like, "If Haslam had only done this, we would've gotten 5,000 jobs, if Haslam had done his job." I knew that actually wasn't an issue, but it wasn't going to do any good for me to say, "Well, the reality is they don't think our workforce is prepared in that particular area."

So sometimes I think great leaders, they bear pain, they don't inflict it, and there's just sometimes I guarantee you all have stories like that in your—

Margaret Spellings: It's lonely at the top, Bill, as they say.

Bill Haslam: What would you say?

Phil Bredeesen: Well, for me, it was more personal. When I was mayor, I have a son who would've been 11 at the time, and if you're mayor, as you well know and you're doing stuff, I mean, the newspaper is every other day going to be saying something bad about you on the front page, criticizing something and there's just this stuff and quotes. I mean, I was desperate that my son not learn the way to think about me from reading the front page of the Tennessean or The Banner at that time. And as governor it was like—

Bill Haslam: You mean all those stories weren't true?

Phil Bredeesen: What's that?

Bill Haslam: All those stories weren't true?

Phil Bredeesen: Well, some of them were true. So that to me was the cost of it, just that sense of you don't want your— My wife is sophisticated enough to read through that, but an 11-year-old is going to take a lot out of that. By the time I was governor, he was off and in college and he could see through that, but that was the toughest part of me, the biggest cost of going into public life.

Anthony Foxx: Can I add one thing?

Phil Bredeesen: Yes.

Anthony Foxx: Because I think another cost is, as I'm sitting here listening, is today as a private citizen, if I say something about a belief that I have, gets taken at face value, people assume that it's my belief. But when you're in public life, that sort of goes away and people sort of wonder who's telling this person to say this? Or is it really what that person believes or what have you? And I think that's really — shame on us in the public sphere and really across the board because one of the fundamental things about being a public servant is trying to serve and trying to be as genuine as you can in the course of doing that. And I think we've lost a little bit of

that and it actually makes it a little harder to do the job, I think.

Bill Haslam: I'm going to let Phil ask our last question, but I'm going to ask the next last one. If you were to go back to your old role as a secretary, what would you like to do that's either you didn't finish to do or you'd want to do differently? If you got to parachute back into the old world, what different thought or approach or initiative would you bring?

Anthony Foxx: Well, I would first of all ask to be treasury secretary because I—

Bill Haslam: You want to be on the dollar?

Anthony Foxx: I would like to sign the money, yes. That's what I'd like to do. That would be my number one goal. But okay, if I have to be back at Transportation, no, I would really get into back to the Chevron issue. I would really get into how we prepare our regulation and our approach to regulation for new technology. We have a lot of prescriptive regulations today. Literally a car brake has to be one that a human foot can touch, but we're reaching a point where there may not be steering wheels in cars and other things. And so we need to start drafting rules that are performance-based that give a different gloss to how rules are promulgated. So I think I'd probably get into a lot of the new technology in transportation.

Margaret Spellings: I think what I would want to do is try to relight the sense of urgency around preparing America's workforce, which I think has really waned. People have maybe given up on whether we can do it or the technology is going to overtake us. And this is a good place to say it because Davidson is a fantastic place where you're going to get a fantastic education, but there's no substitute for a learned, literate, critically thinking, well-spoken, good writing kind of citizen of our country, and I'd want to try to help people return to those first principles.

Bill Haslam: Yeah. If I could add an editorial comment to that, I think the country went through a remarkable period starting in 2000 with President Bush. You had a Republican president who said, "We're not going to accept the idea that there's some kids in some places that can't learn," and really worked hard to have a program that addressed that. Hard to do. Then you had a Democrat president, President Obama come and actually go against the traditional Democrat stronghold, the teachers unions, and putting assessments in place tied to evaluations for classroom teachers.

I think both of those made an enormous difference. I think I'm sad about election of — presidential elections — 2016, 2020, 2024, barely a word about education, period. I think it's one of the most critical issues facing our country. And we're talking about— Well, I won't go there, but a whole lot of things that are total silly nonsense instead of really important issues.

Phil Bredezen: Just to follow up on that before our last question here, I think what you've just said underlines the importance of having some continuity in terms of what public policy as even when you have changes of administrations. I mean, Bill and I both worked very hard on the subject of education and particularly probably K through 12 education together. I did some

things and when Bill got an office, he said, "I like the general direction. I'm going to turn it sideways and color this piece blue and do it."

But if you work on something that for 16 years, it is more than twice as good than working on it for eight years. And Bill's willingness to sort of say, "I'm going to continue this in my own way," as opposed to, "Oh, no. Bredesen, he was an idiot. We're going to do it this way now," really has made a difference in performance in Tennessee.

I want to close with this question. Our podcast is named "You Might Be Right" in honor of and a statement made by Howard Baker who I think is a model of what a partisan who understands how to work in the real world can be, and one that I wish many more people would follow today. And there are certainly notable ways in which he changed his mind on something as a result of conversations and learning about, Panama Canal comes to mind. Is there an experience in your own life that you could tell us about where you had some opinion about it and by opening up your mind and listening to the other side or some other point of view, you really ended up changing your mind?

Margaret Spellings: I would say when I got to Washington, I was at the White House and then I went over to the Department of Education. You have this idea that the swamp, the bureaucrats of the department, many thousands of federal employees, and they were not going to be for me and I wasn't going to be for them. And that was wrong. They are some of the most talented, committed people who show up and do the work, the people every day, and it was an honor to lead them and a pleasure to serve with them.

Anthony Foxx: Yeah. I would say, other than home where I get challenged on my positions every day, I would say that the concept of regulation, particularly environmental regulations as it relates to infrastructure build outs, I had a lot of conversation during my confirmation about this topic, and I actually – this may be Pollyannish, but I actually believe there is a center there where people on both sides can really come together to figure out a better way to get projects done more quickly.

I think it can be done without sacrificing the environment. I think it can be done without sacrificing issues related to environmental justice. And we were actually able to do some of that during the Obama administration. In the typical case, you would have documents go from your offices, about a highway project say, and it would go to 21 different agencies, and usually it was on paper. So literally it would go to agency to agency to agency. And we actually had success.

Now, we couldn't do this on every project, but when we really tried and said, "This is an important priority," we would have those agencies more or less in the same room and doing a concurrent review. And we were able to strip out a lot of time that would've taken otherwise. So I actually think on something like that, when I think about my confirmation hearing and Ted Cruz having this conversation with me, and Bill Shuster on the TNI committee having this conversation with me, I feel like we made progress, but I think there's more progress that can be made on an issue like that.

Phil Bredesen: I think you have both been very thoughtful and articulate guests and this has been a great event. I just want to thank you both for making the time to be here.

Bill Haslam: I do too. Not just making the time, but first serving. It is no small thing, and I'm incredibly grateful. And I'll say this, all four of us would say this, you might be frustrated and exhausted by the political situation today. Almost all of us are. The wrong response is to give up and to say, "I'm out of here." Because politics is not a spectator sport. This all matters too much, and it's about we, the people, all the whole mess of us, of different persuasions and backgrounds and opinions and thoughts, and I would encourage you that this stuff matters and be looking for folks who are looking to solve problems when you go vote. Forget about their rhetoric. Look at what they've actually done. Do they have a history of solving problems? It's one of the things I appreciate about both of you all. Thank you for joining us.

Margaret Spellings: Thank you both.

Anthony Foxx: Thank you.

Margaret Spellings: This is awesome. Thank you.

Marianne Wanamaker: Thanks for listening to "You Might Be Right." Be sure to follow on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your favorite shows. And please help spread the word by sharing, rating and reviewing the show.

Thank you, Governors Bredesen and Haslam, for hosting these conversations. "You Might Be Right" is brought to you by the Baker School of Public Policy and Public Affairs at the University of Tennessee with support from the Boyd Fund for Leadership and Civil Discourse. To learn more about the show and our work, go to youmightberight.org and follow the show on social media @YMBRpodcast.

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