

# New Hampshire's model of leadership offers a different path

Recently I had the privilege of sitting in on a conversation that quietly revealed how effective leadership works in New Hampshire.



Will Stewart

Leadership Unplugged, hosted by Leadership New Hampshire in partnership with the Warren B. Rudman Center for Justice, Leadership & Public Service, brought together two Leadership New Hampshire alumni, recently retired Congresswoman Ann McLane Kuster and recently retired New Hampshire Supreme Court Justice James Bassett, for a bipartisan and candid reflection on their decades of public service. Thoughtfully moderated by Lucy Hodder, director of Health and Life Sciences Law and professor at UNH's Franklin Pierce School of Law, the conversation featured no talking points and no slogans, just stories, candor, and hard-earned wisdom about how change really happens in a small, civic-minded state like ours.

Both participated in Leadership New Hampshire in the early 1990s, long before either stepped into the high-profile public roles they would later hold, and long before today's heightened political polarization. They first met more than 50 years ago as college students, and their friendship has endured across differing political paths and decades of public service.

What emerged was a reminder that leadership in New Hampshire is not about titles. It is about relationships.

Over and over, both speakers returned to the same idea: your word matters. In a small state, reputations travel faster than résumés. You never know when the person you meet today will be someone you work with, rely on, or answer to years later. As Justice Bassett put it, "Be kind and generous to everyone. It's good ad-

vice for humanistic reasons, but also professionally." You never know, he said, how someone you interact with today might help or hinder you in the future.

This is not transactional advice. It is a call to consistency. Leadership here requires showing up the same way, regardless of who is in the room. It means following through on commitments because people are relying on you. It means never burning a bridge because, in New Hampshire, there are not that many bridges to spare.

Relationships are not just helpful. They are the infrastructure.

That truth shows up everywhere in our civic life. Congresswoman Kuster spoke about the importance of meeting people where they are and resisting dogma.

"Our values are often the same," she said, "even when our perspectives differ."

The work of leadership, she suggested, is finding common ground without asking people to abandon who they are.

Justice Bassett described serv-

ing on the state Supreme Court as "an arranged marriage for five." You do not get to pick who you serve alongside, but you are bound to one another. The only way it works is through frequent communication, mutual respect, and a shared commitment to the institution. Leadership, in that sense, is less about control and more about care.

Another theme that surfaced was service that starts close to home.

Bassett urged people to lean into municipal service, drawing on his own decades of service on his town's planning board and board of selectmen. There may be no better education in democracy than sitting at town meeting with hundreds of your neighbors, listening to their concerns, and voting shoulder to shoulder on the future of your community. It is messy, time-consuming, and deeply human. It is also where trust is built.

Both Bassett and Kuster spoke passionately about nonprofit service, noting that much of what

state government does elsewhere is handled here by nonprofit organizations. In New Hampshire, these organizations are not peripheral; they are essential. Serving on a board, volunteering time, or mentoring within a nonprofit is not extracurricular. It is civic leadership in action.

None of this is fast. All of it takes energy. Relationships take time. Listening takes patience. Trust takes years.

But that may be the most important lesson of all.

At a moment when cynicism feels easier than engagement, New Hampshire's model of leadership offers a different path. It is quieter. More relational. Less performative. It asks more of us personally, not just ideologically.

Leadership here is built conversation by conversation, promise by promise, relationship by relationship.

And especially now, that kind of leadership is not just relevant. It is necessary.

Will Stewart is executive director of Leadership New Hampshire. He lives in Manchester.

## Letters

### We should question electric rates

To the Editor: Lena Nirk's recent OpEd in the New Hampshire Union Leader, "Don't we want to know if our electric rates are just and reasonable?" should be required reading for all state of New Hampshire representatives and senators.

One area of this excellent analysis that requires further elaboration is that transmission owners receive a guaranteed, risk-free, rate of return of more than 11% on transmission assets. You don't need a PhD in economics to know that an 11% risk-free return

in today's economy is outrageous. With zero oversight from ISO New England, investor-owned electric utilities are gold-plating transmission projects.

Transmission assets with an estimated useful life of 30-40 years are being retired prematurely and being replaced with assets at currently inflated prices. If paying for the new, unnecessary asset with the 11% rate of return isn't enough, New Hampshire electric customers are also required to pay for the remaining depreciated value of the prematurely retired asset.

Since New Hampshire's electric rates are among the highest in the country, we obviously need to make changes to the current ineffective regulatory process. ISO New England has proven to be nothing more than a "rubber stamp" for transmission owners. And given our current electric rates, it's impossible to have any confidence in the role of the New Hampshire Public Utilities Commission. I'm not sure HB 1724 is the answer, but I am sure something needs to be done.

RICHARD JOYCE  
Londonderry

### Trump saps share a lexicon of lies

To the Editor: We all plow through a lot of media: videos, talking heads, columns, internet, ads, talk shows....

But I have a great way to save you time sorting through this barrage: the use of certain phrases shows the people talking/writing/bloviating don't know what they're talking about. If they use one of these phrases, you can



tune them out, with zero loss.

For example, "Biden's Open Border": If someone uses this phrase, they're just spouting propaganda. Some actual facts from the BBC, Dec. 2024, "US deportations under Biden surpass Trump's record" and from NPR on Dec. 2024, "deportations hit a 10-year high in 2024." Biden did not have an "open border" — the term is an open lie.

"The Liberal Media": The right wing claims that the media is controlled by liberals. The exact opposite is true: most media, of all types — radio, TV, newspapers, internet (think X) — are owned by right-wing owners. Using the

phrase liberal media comes with a complete right-wing bias.

"The Stolen Election" to refer to Trump's loss in 2020: Trump and millions of his avid supporters talk about "the stolen election" all the time, but talk is cheap and proof costs. In more than 100 court cases (you know, where you actually have to prove something not just spout off) the claim of a stolen election was unanimously rejected.

So, don't bother to read stuff with these bogus phrases, it will be hogwash. There, I've saved you some time.

MICHAEL FRANZDEL  
Portsmouth

### Distractions from the Epstein files

To the Editor: Why Iran, and why the focus on regime change when that has never worked in American history? Now the media is hyperfocused on Iran, just as President Donald Trump hopes they'd be.

The answer is right before our eyes: pull the people's attention and the media's focus off of the Epstein files, which may contain proof of the President's sinful role in the exploitation of young girls — just as he bragged about taking advantage of women.

MALCOLM ODELL  
Exeter

# Women and girls deserve safety, not stonewalling

Governor Kelly Ayotte has played the Grim Reaper to legislation that provides reasonable protections for women and girls. Last July, she neutralized HB 148, a bill that would have allowed for female-only spaces in bathrooms, locker rooms and prisons. A similar bill (SB 268) recently met the same fate. She is following in the footsteps of Governor Chris Sununu, who in 2024 vetoed HB 396 — the first bill of its kind to allow for classification on the basis of biological sex — setting into motion a string of legal setbacks that amplify the same message: the vulnerability of women and girls doesn't matter.



Dr. Aida Cerundolo

Regardless of how many vetoes Governor Ayotte stamps onto the unalienable truth of biological sex, it will persist into eternity. Our state's failure to ac-

knowledge this truth puts women and girls at risk.

Now, SB 552 is making its way through the legislature, a bill that allows for sex segregation in bathrooms, locker rooms and prisons. This brave legislation seeks to protect women's intimate spaces, and for that it risks the Grim Reaper's scythe.

It's no secret that women are susceptible to violence and sexual assault. According to the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence survey, almost 44% of women have reported contact sexual assault in their lifetime, and more than 20% experienced

completed or attempted rape. Spaces such as bathrooms and locker rooms are secluded areas where women and girls disrobe, requiring higher levels of privacy and protection.

Incarcerated women are the most vulnerable, having no option to escape an unsafe environment.

As a result of "progressive" reforms, female inmates nationally have suffered sexual harassment and assault from trans-identified biological men housed in prisons designated for women. This violence is unsurprising considering more than half of trans-identified male prisoners are serving time for sex offenses. Most victims are afraid to report the abuse for fear of retaliation that would restrict their privileges or deny them parole.

The situation in neighboring Massachusetts is

particularly egregious, where men convicted of child rape and murder are housed with female inmates for simply declaring they feel like a woman. The situation has gotten so bad in the Bay State and other states that they hand out condoms to reduce pregnancies — in women's prisons.

Female students in our own state have reported harassment in school bathrooms and locker rooms. Granite Staters understand that our daughters need protected spaces, and polls show most support schools having separate bathrooms and locker rooms for girls and boys.

Still, Governor Ayotte has expressed dismay that the previous bills were "overly broad and impractical to enforce." But the legislation narrowly addressed separation by sex in bathrooms and locker rooms that

accommodate multiple simultaneous occupants, as well as sports teams and prisons. SB 552 is equally narrow — pertaining to the same specific circumstances — and doesn't even mandate sex separation, but only allows for it.

Yet if Governor Ayotte considers the concept of biological sex to be too broad of a distinguisher, our legislators cannot be faulted for acknowledging this broad sweeping reality. Biological sex is a binary truth that they did not create, but are willing to acknowledge in the service of New Hampshire women and girls. This truth cannot be narrowed further without conflicting with the reality that women exist.

And regarding the practicality of enforcing a measure that protects women's private spaces, it necessitates a level of honesty

similar to that required to effectuate the legal sale of alcohol. It is much harder to estimate a person's age than it is to guess their sex, yet the law limiting alcohol sales to those age 21 and over has never received the scrutiny that legislation acknowledging biological sex has endured.

States such as Oklahoma, Texas, and Kansas have taken a stand in support of their female citizens by passing legislation defining biological sex that protects women's intimate spaces, while lawmakers in other states are working to enact similar bills.

If SB 552 lands on Governor Ayotte's desk, she has an opportunity to support the safety and privacy of women and girls by setting aside the scythe and picking up her pen instead.

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"There Is Nothing So Powerful As Truth" — Daniel Webster

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"Where the Spirit of the Lord Is, There Is Liberty" — II Corinthians 3:17

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### MALLARD FILLMORE

By Bruce Tinsley



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