

Kelly Brownell:

Hello everyone. And welcome to Policy 360. I am your host Kelly Brownell, the Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. Today, we're going to deviate from our typical format. Usually I have a conversation with a single person about their research or ideas. But today I have three guests, and we are going to talk about an exciting initiative in North Carolina, the North Carolina Leadership Forum. I am joined first by Leslie Winner. Leslie is the former Executive Director of the Z Smith Reynolds Foundation and a former North Carolina General Assembly Member. I am also joined by John Hood. John is president of the John William Pope Foundation. And finally, Frederick, better known as Fritz Mayer, is also here. Fritz, is Professor and Associate Dean of Strategy and Innovation at Sanford. And he is the Director of the Center for Political Leadership, Innovation and Service known as POLIS.

And for reasons that will become clear in a moment. I'm going to tell you that John and Leslie have very different political views. As I mentioned, John is with the Pope Foundation, which is known for its conservative views. Since its inception the foundation has given over \$100 million to charities and organizations in North Carolina. Leslie winner, as I said is the Former Executive Director of the Z Smith Reynolds foundation, a foundation that supports groups working to make North Carolina more just, equitable, sustainable, and vital. John and Leslie frequently have differing policy views. Yet they both agreed to be part of this exciting initiative to deal with the polarizing political climate in North Carolina and in the US in general. Welcome everyone. I'm delighted to have you here this morning.

Male:

Thank you. Great to be here.

Kelly Brownell:

So we are gathered here to speak about an exciting endeavor that you all contributed to in important ways. Something that could become a model for other states, the North Carolina Leadership Forum. Fritz, tell us about the forum in a nutshell.

Fritz Mayer:

Well, in North Carolina, as in the United States, we really live in polarized times. There's a dearth of civil discourse and a consequences that people are really turned off to the political process. I've lost confidence that we can solve our problems together. And a big part of the problem is that we just don't talk to each other anymore. We don't talk to each other across the political aisle in particular. So the North Carolina leadership Forum is taking on that problem.

The idea was to identify 30 plus leaders in North Carolina, highly diverse group across the political aisle, people in the general assembly, mayors, heads of foundation, business people, wide group of civic leaders. And bring them together at Duke at Sanford to talk to each other. And not just to talk, but to put them to work on a problem that we all agree on is a problem for North Carolina. That is, how can we help North Carolinians earn enough to support their families? And go to work on it. We know we won't agree on everything, but even if we don't agree on too many things, what will have happened we hope is that people will have learned to listen to each other, come to understand why we think differently. And recognize that we're all at the end of the day, North Carolinians who care a great deal about the future of our state.

Kelly Brownell:

No, it's a very interesting process that you're undertaking. And the process here could be as important as the outcome of the particular top discussion on particular topics that you're discussing. So why is there a need then to bring people together? Leslie, I'll start with you. And do you think this is a unique way to do so?

Leslie Winner:

Well, one of the pieces of the problem is that media and social media have gotten very fragmented. So that people of different viewpoints don't tend to see the same news, hear the same opinions, read the same facts, or they read the same facts spun very different ways. So even the very basis of conversation has been dichotomized. So John sometime ago wrote an op-ed that bemoaned that, and I read it and I agreed. So the two of us got together and tried to think through what we might do together, coming from our different viewpoints to at least create a place where people could receive the same facts, talk through their different interpretations of them and learn to speak respectfully. And also I think more important learn to listen and really listen to hear. I think that's the beginning of it.

Kelly Brownell:

Thank you. Tell us a little bit about this op-ed and what points you were making in it.

John Hood:

Well, I was making the point that, it's easy to say that the public is polarized, voters are polarized, North Carolinians are polarized, but what do we exactly mean by that? Part of it is that the political parties used to be looser in their ideological cohesion. I used to have people who had more disagreements, but they were in the same party because they had a regional history together. The party had something to do with their backgrounds or their particular where they came from.

So there was more debate within political parties, for example. And also in communities, you had more mixing in terms of political ideas and expression. And if you add to that, what Leslie was talking about, which is the media cocoon that many of us live in. In fact, that many of us have spun for ourselves because we have social media that acts as the gatekeeper for the information that we get. We express an opinion about the social media posts that my friend made, that I agree with and everybody else agrees with. And maybe occasionally you've got a disagreement and so you chase them out.

And so you do that and you'd watch TV networks that reinforce what you already believe. And you read magazines and newspapers that reinforce. So what that creates is a situation where people really are reinforced in their views more than they're challenged. They don't really know a lot of people personally who disagree very fundamentally with what they believe. And I'm not arguing that what that means is that the people who disagree with me have the wrong ideas. Of course, that might be right.

What I'm getting at is, you don't really understand what you believe. If you don't understand what somebody else believes then you're certainly not capable of persuading anybody to go along with something. Look at how people feel today about political and social institutions. There's a lack of confidence in almost all of them. The Supreme Court is okay on that score. The military is okay on that score. The church to some extent is okay on that score. But almost every other institution, whether it be a political institution, or the media, or business, people have a lack of respect for that. And that means, I think in part that people are hungry for an adult conversation.

Leslie Winner:

So I've just to go back a step and say that I think it's important to understand before this while John and I certainly knew each other, we had never actually had a conversation with each other. So the first step was for us to build enough trust with each other, to enable us to go forward with this process.

John Hood:

And it's important to remember this was not... Throughout the years there have been, "Oh, we've got a problem. Let's appoint a blue ribbon commission of gray hairs to solve the problem." That's not what this is. There are people in the leadership forum ranks who do have gray hairs and have been around and done things or maybe failed and learned from it. We also have younger people. We have emerging leaders who are just starting in the process of being a leader. We have some young mayors and county commissioners. We have some young people in education. So it's a mixture of views, backgrounds, geography, and age.

Fritz Mayer:

And I would say that we really started with trying to see if we could come to an agreed set of facts. This is not just people talking about their opinions. We have a lot of data, a lot of information on the table. And we're really trying to see if we can work forward from an agreed set of facts about what's going on in North Carolina. And then to recognize the ways in which we interpret those facts differently. And to come to understand those points of view. And then and only then really move forward to try to identify the things that we might do or might be able to agree on doing in North Carolina.

Kelly Brownell:

There's a very real human part of this. Isn't there? Leslie, you alluded to this when you talked about interacting with John and developing trust between the two of you. How does one in a larger form go about developing trust and what sort of things can be done in a group like that, that might accomplish building trust?

Leslie Winner:

So, there's a term safe spaces, maybe a little overused, but it does have to be a safe space first of all. That people feel like they can say what they believe and not have it used against them outside the space. What I observed in this first meeting was that people were polite about listening to other people. They were forthcoming about talking, saying what they were thinking. But there wasn't really engagement in the sense that too many people were willing to question what somebody else said or ask them why they believed it or dig into it a little bit. So I think that this trust process we'll have to grow that. It was unrealistic that it would happen in the first meeting. And then it's going to come out of some combination of continuing to meet with small... Continuously through [inaudible 00:09:55] met in small groups where people just get to know what the backstory of where they came from, who their parents were, who their people are.

Kelly Brownell:

Yeah. John, what do you think about that, the human part of this, the building trust part?

John Hood:

Wow. What I think is that we're not Androids and we do not form our opinions, and act on them, and express them as if we were all rational calculating computers and adding up the columns. Human

beings, look each other in the eye and get certain feelings that they don't have if they talk on the phone, for example. And if you know somebody and they're expressing a view that you find not just incorrect, but abhorrent or distasteful, you don't typically jump to the conclusion and start yelling at them and calling them names. You say, "Well, I know this person, I know this person, why is this person saying this crazy thing?" The point of that is not necessarily to change their minds or change your mind, but to understand better. This is in many ways... The lack of civil discourse is a failure of imagination or empathy.

You can't imagine yourself in somebody else's shoes. It's easier to do that if you know somebody who's different from you. Again, the argument is not we're all going to end up at the end of the year agreeing on everything. You might better understand why you disagree and that's progress. In fact, the process here really is the main outcome. We're trying to model a process that we hope can be emulated and applied and iterated on for years to come. Clearly, the public wants not just their own opinion to prevail, though most people feel that way. But they want a better dialogue. And that's what we're trying to model.

Kelly Brownell:

So for you as individuals, do you recall moments at the meeting where this happened for you, where you said, "Aha, now I understand that point of view better." Or, "Now I get it why that person might be feeling that way." Are there any anecdotes that you might share that help address. John, I'll start with you?

John Hood:

Well, Leslie's point is correct. There wasn't a lot of active, engaged disagreement yet. That's coming, but there were serious attempts to agree across the aisle on a couple of matters. There was a case where that we were talking about, what does it mean to have set a goal of people being able to support their families? What does that mean for a full-time worker with not very much scale? And there was agreement across the aisle. A couple of different people, with very different points of view agreed on the goal there. Now that may not sound like a big deal, but once you can agree on some common objectives, then you can have a disagreement about means and you might even mix and match the means, because no one's going to get everything they want. But if you don't have a fundamental agreement about what the goal is, it's hard to proceed.

Kelly Brownell:

And Leslie, were there moments for you that you found, especially important?

Leslie Winner:

So I was at a table in which we were talking about the root causes of the problem. And there was a spectrum of views as you would expect from lack of individual responsibility, to lack of what I'll just call societal structures, community colleges and institutions. And I said, what I was hearing around the table was a spectrum, but that I was confident that nobody in the room was all the way at one end of the spectrum or the other. That all of us really believed that both individual responsibility and societal responsibility were at play. And the difference was where we landed on that spectrum. And it was a clearly eye opening moment when somebody else at the table said, "Do you really believe that? Do you put yourself on... You're not at one end or the other." And this recognition that we weren't polar opposites, but at different places on the spectrum was a very important moment at that table.

Kelly Brownell:

And Fritz, how about you? What were some of the ways this affected you?

Fritz Mayer:

Well, I'd say... Stepping back for a second, one of the things you can hear from this conversation was why I was so excited when I learned from Leslie about the conversation she and John were having about the forum. Because certainly we are, as you well know, really trying to be more engaged in North Carolina. And particularly around these questions of civil discourse and the political dialogue. And so when I learned of this idea and saw that one of the things that we could do was be a place, a safe space to use that term, where people could come together and have this kind of dialogue. You could see why I was excited about that possibility.

In response to your question. I think that Leslie and John, if I've gotten that right, I would say I was surprised to the extent to which there were a lot of shared values in the room. And the extent to which they were shared visions of the end goal now. We have not really gotten to the toughest part now, which is how do we get from here to there? But it is true that people have different weights on different values, but I think there was a lot more commonality. And I suspect that the participants were also surprised at that coming out of the meeting.

Kelly Brownell:

So now that you've had an experience with this meeting, you are portraying a picture of this as a first step. That it was a way for people to get acquainted, to share ideas about things, not yet to get into the heavy debate, but to do some of the introductory things. Do you think this is promising? Does this look like it'll land in a good place at the end of the day? John.

John Hood:

Well, one way I've been thinking about this is we have a process that we've just begun and it proceeds through subsequent meetings is that the pronouns will shift. So in the initial meeting, we were trying to get people as much as possible to speak from the, I place. Here's what I think, here's my background that informs what I think. We're going to get into more of a, they question. Which will be more like, well, they think, or, they believe or they act. Now that gets you to an important place because that's a lot where the disagreements occur. It also gets you to where you were assuming something about other people, or other situations, or data, or whatever. And then eventually of course, we're trying to get to the, we place. What do we think as a group are the areas where we might agree or areas where you can at least tolerate something you don't agree with because you're going to get something else you think is more important? So I'm thinking about it in terms of changing your perception of what the subject of the sentence says. I, they or we.

Kelly Brownell:

Very interesting point of view. Leslie, what do you think about that?

Leslie Winner:

So I think about what the goal of this is, it is not to change people's deeply held values or beliefs. We're not trying to turn everybody into the same mindset, which would be neither realistic nor really desirable. But I think of it as can we identify a space where everybody can tolerate standing. Nobody has to stomach something they really can't tolerate. And everybody gets what they really need. Now,

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whether we can get to that, I don't really know, but I do believe that if we can honestly try to get there in the process, some civil discourse muscles will have been built. And if that happens, I think it will be a success.

Kelly Brownell:

This strikes me as the most impressive effort. And it's nice that it wasn't just a one-time effort, but there will be follow-up and ongoing meetings and more relationship building that will occur. And I also appreciate the goodwill with which the three of you have approached this. That the three of you may not agree on everything, but you came together in this interesting forum in order to accomplish something, to get something done, to make progress on important social issues. So I hope this does become a model that people in other places can follow. And I'm really happy that the Sanford School of Public Policy could play a role in this. And I appreciate you all joining us today. Thank you for doing this.

Leslie Winner:

Thanks to you.

Male:

Thank you.

Kelly Brownell:

So we've been talking today about the North Carolina Leadership Forum. It is a year long effort to bring people with different political viewpoints together to talk about how we can enable more North Carolinians to earn enough to support their families. Our guests today were Leslie Winner, former Executive Director of the Z Smith Reynolds Foundation. And former North Carolina General Assembly Member, John Hood, President of the John William Pope Foundation. And finally Fritz Mayer, Professor and Associate Dean for Strategy and Innovation at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. Until next time, I'm Kelly Brownell.