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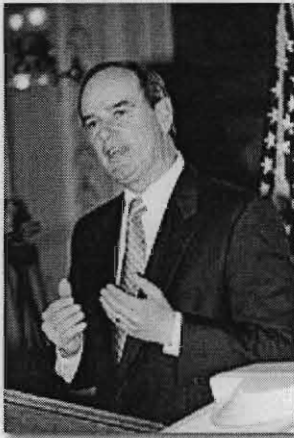
Donald T. DiFrancesco

Acting Governor

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Address To The People of New Jersey Acting Governor Donald T. DiFrancesco February 5, 2001

"A Better Life For Each New Generation"



Chief Justice Poritz, fellow legislators, members of the Cabinet, honored guests, and fellow citizens: Thank you for joining me today for my first Address to the People of New Jersey. I welcome this opportunity to speak to all the New Jersey residents I will serve in the months ahead as both legislator and chief executive.

Let me begin by applauding Governor Whitman for her outstanding leadership over the past seven years. I join you in wishing her great success as she serves the nation at the EPA.

I also want to take just a moment to recognize a very special young man who is with us today. Brian Dillon is a fifth grader at the Hillcrest Science and Technology Elementary School in Franklin Township, Somerset County. Last Tuesday, he gave his classmates a lesson that I doubt they'll ever forget. Brian recognized that his

friend Andrew was choking on a piece of food and couldn't breathe. Brian, who learned the Heimlich maneuver from his mother, reacted quickly to dislodge the food and restore Andrew's breathing. Brian is with us today along with his parents, Grace and Orville. I think they all deserve our recognition.

The role of Acting Governor is a privilege I assume with humility and accept with confidence. The Constitution of New Jersey provides for this transition, and we will abide by that Constitution. The business of government will go forward.

"The role of Acting Governor is a privilege I assume with humility and accept with confidence."

I am particularly pleased to be here in the General Assembly Chambers today. It was in this chamber that I was first sworn into elective office more than 25 years ago. Thank you, Speaker Collins, for welcoming me back to your house -- the people's

house.

In a way, coming here symbolizes the approach I have always tried to take - reaching out, across the hallway and across the aisle, to find common ground on common goals. This transition is a unique situation, and it presents a unique opportunity to work side by side for the people we all serve.

As I was in 1976, I am truly blessed today to have my family with me. I have but one regret. My parents, Paul and Clara, are not with me today.

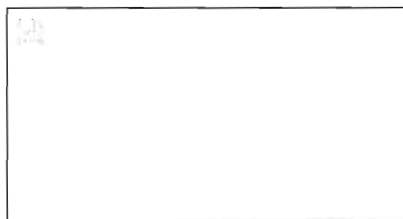
My parents took exceptional pride in my decision to pursue public service. They believed in the strength and the equity of a democratic government. They relished the opportunities that it afforded its citizenry.

My parents came from Italy through Ellis Island as young children. They spoke often about the tremendous hope that filled those people who came to our



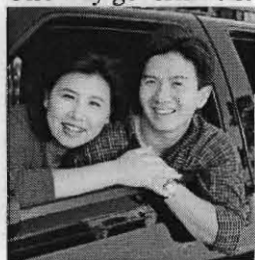
shores. They believed in the dream of a better life for each new generation.

I think of my parents today as I set out on this new and incredible journey. I take with me that same spirit of promise that guided them and still inspires all who seek a greater good in New Jersey.



I also take on this journey a deep understanding of the responsibility I have been given. I have been entrusted with not simply making government function, but making government work for all the people.

One way government works for people is by removing obstacles to a better quality of life. For many New Jerseyans - from the young couple starting out to the senior citizens striving to remain in their homes - there is no greater obstacle than high property taxes.



I have a plan for easing this burden. I ask my colleagues in both houses to join me in enacting Property Tax Relief Now. Returning excess surplus to the taxpayers is the right thing to do. It is relief they need. It is relief they deserve.

Governor Whitman's budget included the first piece of this plan, doubling the NJ Saver Rebate to an average of \$500.

But let's do more. Let's raise the Homestead Rebate for our seniors to \$750. Seniors have waited 10 years for an increase. That's too long. And to make sure they never have to wait again, let's also index the Homestead Rebate to inflation. Costs have gone up for our seniors. Help for our seniors must keep pace.

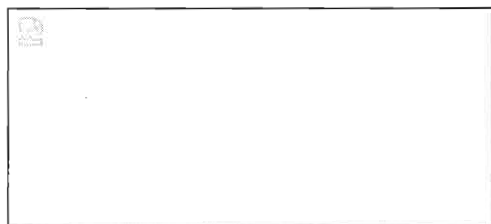
"Returning excess surplus to the taxpayers is the right thing to do. It is relief they need. It is relief they deserve."

We should also consider, as part of our property tax relief plan, Speaker Collins' proposal to raise the income threshold on the senior tax freeze program.

Finally, I recommend that we send more dollars back to our mayors and councils to help them keep a lid on property taxes. Let's increase by \$100 million the legislative block grant program. Let me remind you, that's money that can only be used to lower property taxes.



Another way we can work together to improve our quality of life is to act on my proposals to protect our drinking water, build a healthier New Jersey and provide prescription drugs for middle class seniors. These are goals that we all share. Now let's join together and take action.



I know my colleagues are committed to a cleaner environment and to helping seniors and taxpayers. We must devote the same energy to addressing a problem that may be less noted but is no less worthy: the plight of our neediest children.

At the dawn of the 21st century, at a time of unparalleled prosperity, no child's needs should go

unmet.

This year, the annual Kids Count report showed that New Jersey has made significant improvements in child well-being. That's something we can all be proud of. But that report also showed that nearly one out of every eight children in New Jersey still lives in poverty, at risk of

hunger and chronic illness. Each week, more than 25 babies are born not having received prenatal care. Each week, more than 200 reports of child abuse are substantiated.

These aren't just numbers or statistics. They are our children.

None of us should rest until every child in every neighborhood has the opportunity to realize their dream of a better life.

The answer isn't another blue-ribbon panel or well-intentioned task force. The answer is action. That is why I will personally lead an effort that will take me on the road, along with key members of my Cabinet, to meet with those on the front line - those devoted to improving the lives of our least fortunate.



I am going to call this effort "KidsNeeds." It will bring us face to face with community and faith-based organizations. With teachers, health care providers, and caseworkers. With parents, children, and the full range of children's advocacy organizations. Many have offered suggestions and plans. Now it's time to bring everyone together to forge consensus and take action - action that I will initiate and direct from my desk in the Governor's Office.

My fellow citizens, we must rededicate ourselves and redouble our efforts so that no child will be robbed of their youth and deprived of their dreams.

I know firsthand how much we can accomplish when we join together behind a common goal. I take great pride that in the past year we all worked together - Democrats and Republicans - to ensure that our children have the very best schools in which to learn. The School Facilities Construction Act stands as a testament to what is possible when we put politics aside and make progress a priority.

This new law will enable us to build top-notch learning environments. But those dollars don't fix a leaky roof or replace an aging boiler if they're sitting in the bank.



That is why I am making it a top priority to get that money invested quickly, efficiently, and in a way that ensures accountability and integrity. I want every child in New Jersey to walk into a school that is safe, secure, and sound.

We will build world-class schools, but providing our children a world-class education requires more. New Jersey teachers are doing everything they can to make this happen. Now we should do everything we can to help our teachers.

That's why I will be directing the new Commissioner of Education to work with the Legislature this spring to create the very best teacher training, retention, and recruitment program in the nation. New Jersey is already the best place in which to live, work, and raise a family. Let's

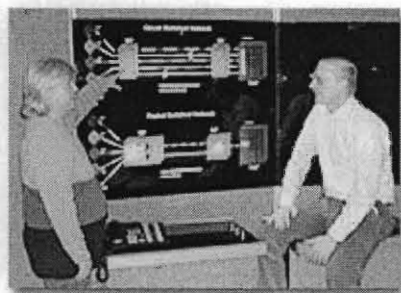
also make it the best place to teach a child.

There can be no question that the key to a better life for each new generation lies in education. And while my own children are grown, I will continue to take a personal interest in our classrooms by visiting schools as I have done throughout my career. In fact, tomorrow I will be visiting Paterson Eastside High with Assemblyman Al Steele and Martin Luther King, III. And I'm pleased that Martin is with us today. Thank you, Martin.

"New Jersey is already the best place in which to live, work, and raise a family. Let's also make it the best place to teach a child."

A world-class education will give our children the tools they need to succeed in tomorrow's

economy. But we must also ensure that our current workforce meets the needs of today's employers.



Last year, one out of five applicants for unemployment benefits did not have a high school diploma. Over 50 percent of people on welfare cannot read above the 8th grade level. Over 70 percent can do no more than 8th grade math. Moreover, many of New Jersey's newest residents are immigrants and many of them have limited English proficiency.

With unemployment at or below 4 percent for the past year, the demand for skilled labor has remained high. Continued economic growth requires that we reach out to

train those whose lack of skills has caused them to be left behind.

So today I am directing the Commissioner of Labor to develop a workplace basic skills program. Let's give all our citizens the help they need to ride the wave of prosperity. And let's give employers the skilled workforce they need to keep our economic engine running at full speed.

Fellow citizens, New Jersey is truly an American mosaic. Our state is home to the most diverse population in the country. I believe our diversity is an asset in which we must invest.

That means investing in programs which give everyone the same opportunity to realize their dreams.

That means fostering an environment that celebrates our state's historical, cultural and artistic treasures.

Most important, investing in diversity means erasing the intolerance and insecurity that undermine our ability to thrive as a community. New Jersey has always been a leader in pursuing and advancing the rights of all individuals. Our history includes the New Jersey Congressional Delegation's unanimous support for the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964. More recently, we were among the first to mandate Holocaust education for all schoolchildren.

We must call on that tradition as we face the ugly truth of racial profiling. This unjustified and unjustifiable practice has divided this state and has hurt the reputation of New Jersey's upstanding law enforcement officers.

It is time for answers, for outreach, and for solutions. I look forward to receiving recommendations from Senator Gormley's committee that will signal not just an intolerance for profiling, but will finally result in a termination of this practice. I commend Senator Gormley for his leadership in this effort.

Our commitment to end racial profiling is unwavering. Just as strong is our commitment to stand behind the members of law enforcement who deserve our support because they've earned it. Let's not allow the sins of a few to undermine the courageous achievements of the many.

The uniqueness of my position will enable me to stay close to the Legislature, and I will count on the input of my colleagues on both sides of the aisle and in both houses. Over the years, you've come to know me and my style of leadership. I do believe in consensus. I do believe in bringing people together to achieve progress. While my title may have changed, I promise that my commitment to this partnership will never end.

I recognize it is an election year, but putting people ahead of politics will signal to all New Jerseyans that we remember and respect the oaths we took as legislators.

"And I know my parents would want to me to lead this state in a way that encourages all of us to create a better future for all of us."

Many years ago, a writer working on a book on the immigrant experience asked my mother about her own experience in

**encourages all of us to create
a better life for each new generation.**

" New Jersey. She told the author, "We came over here with nothing but bare hands. This country gave us a chance to

work. We worked hard for our children. And now they've got what we worked for. We're satisfied."

Born of this soil or on foreign land, all New Jerseyans aspire to the dream that my own parents realized - the dream of a better life for each new generation. And I know my parents would want to me to lead this state in a way that encourages all of us to create a better life for each new generation. It is the best gift they gave me, and it is the best gift we can give New Jersey.

Thank you. God bless New Jersey. Now let's get to work.

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