

Members of the Vermont Senate, distinguished guests and fellow Vermonters, good morning.

I want to begin by thanking the people of Vermont for their faith and trust in me and for the privilege to serve our State. To serve Vermont and Vermonters is the greatest honor of my life.

I also want to thank dear friends and colleagues for their support, and above all my parents, Bob and Kim Gray, and family who could not be here in person today, for their unwavering love and encouragement.

I would like to begin with a recognition of those who are not here. Since the start of this pandemic, we have lost 152 Vermonters. Vermonters who had love to share with their families and much to contribute to our communities. I hope that you will join me in a moment of silence to recognize these Vermonters.

[PAUSE]

Thank you.

---

Beneath the shadow of grief caused by this pandemic, hangs another shadow brought by yesterday's attack — incited by President Trump — on the U.S. Capitol and Members of Congress who were upholding their constitutional obligations to certify national election results.

I stand before you today in shared sadness and disbelief. I commend our Governor for his leadership last evening in calling for the resignation of President Trump or that he be removed from office by his Cabinet, or Congress.

Let the record forever reflect that this was an attack on our democracy, constitution, and most dearly held principles by a sitting president.

Our thoughts are with those brave men and women in the U.S. Capitol who did work yesterday at great personal risk to protect the foundations of our democracy, with Members of Congress and members of the press, and especially with Vermont's Congressional Delegation and their dedicated staff.

If ever there were a time to have Vermont's values present in Washington, it is today.

Our thoughts, however, must also be here — in this space, and time, and moment — where we are called to act with resolve for the well-being of our friends and neighbors, for the resilience of our communities, and for the strength of our democracy.

---

Our history shows that as Vermonters we are brave in the face of fear, we defy the odds, we are not afraid of the unknown, and we welcome the opportunity and responsibility to lead and set a new course.

Perhaps it's the harshness of our winters, the unpredictability of our seasons, the stubbornness and resilience of those who came before us, or a deep pride in the place we are so fortunate to call home, that binds us and enables us, to turn our greatest challenges into our greatest opportunities.

This moment lacks neither.

As we well know, faith in government — and in public officials — has been badly damaged by the proliferation of misinformation and division.

Our challenge, or opportunity here today, is to commit to the principles and values that give Vermonters a deep pride and full faith in the promise — and the essentialness — of good government.

That is why I asked someone who I greatly admire — someone who embodies personal integrity and public service — to administer the oath: Judge Peter Hall. Having had the honor of serving in Judge Hall's chambers as a law clerk, I have witnessed how he lives the ideals that make a democracy work: humility and compassion, a fierce commitment to fairness, an unyielding dedication to equal protection and the rule of law, and an unshakeable belief in, and commitment to, good government.

My commitment to you is to emulate the principles and values I have witnessed Judge Hall uphold throughout his career, in presiding over this Chamber: fairness, compassion, predictability and, most certainly, timeliness.

From our communities to this Chamber, let us set a tone of civility, cooperation and productivity, and do our part to restore and strengthen faith in good government.

---

Second, this hard year has also laid bare some difficult truths about our country, and about Vermont.

The brutal killing of George Floyd, and the resulting justifiable social unrest across this nation and on town greens across Vermont, exposed a reckoning with the work deeply needed to unravel centuries of compounding inequality.

As we start this biennium and recognize the challenges and opportunities before us, let us recall that joining in recognition and support of Black Lives Matter marks neither the beginning nor the end of inequality, but rather an awakening to the continuous experience of members of our communities.

This Chamber has a history of fighting for civil rights, and this year it welcomes new senators and leadership whose experiences and voices only strengthen our ability to meet this moment.

History will reflect how we come together and what measures we take to protect and promote equal protection under the law and demand respect for human dignity.

I look forward to working with each of you, and all Vermonters, in this undertaking.

---

But there is still more work to be done — more challenges and opportunities — top among them, recovering stronger from this pandemic.

Vermont's pandemic response has made me so proud to be a Vermonter. We continue to stick together, stay home, and look out for our neighbors.

Unfortunately, this pandemic is far from over and, as we well know, it has laid everything bare:

From inequities in access to basic internet so critical for online learning and remote work, to the absolute essentialness of affordable, quality child care, to the economic well-being of our families and businesses.

Not only will we be judged by how effectively we continue to meet the humanitarian and emergency needs of Vermonters, but also how we envision and prepare for a stronger, more equitable and economically viable Vermont.

There are countless examples of creative, out-of-the box thinking that are already transforming how we do business.

Using federal relief funds, for example, local restaurants have prepared meals for families in need, while supporting our farmers and strengthening local food systems.

When schools closed, childcare providers worked with communities to open facilities to expand access and support families and essential workers across Vermont.

Restaurants and libraries closed their doors, but left open access to WiFi, making the internet accessible to local students and workers who needed to get online.

In envisioning Vermont's future, I am inspired by these stories and so many Vermonters I've met: young farmers and food producers, business leaders, founders of community co-working spaces and innovative start-ups, home-grown renewable energy pioneers, and Vermonters who serve our state as teachers, tradespeople, first responders and healthcare workers.

They know, as we do, that nothing about our future will be business as usual. They recognize that as one of the oldest states in the country, our future depends on strategic investments in our economic infrastructure.

So much of the work that needs to be done is already well underway in this Chamber:

First, the economic well-being of our families.

We must continue to envision and enact a future where no Vermonter has to choose between paying the bills and caring for family. A future where every worker has the security of paid family and medical leave, every parent can access the high-quality childcare necessary to do their best work, every elder is supported as they look to age in dignity and good health, and every Vermonter can choose the course of their life as we protect the right to reproductive health.

Second, the growth of our workforce and viability of our communities.

We must continue to envision and enact a future where small businesses and new industries are growing, and a diverse workforce pipeline — from our high schools to our technical schools, community and state colleges — brings the next generation into good and necessary jobs in Vermont. We must bring our local businesses back from the brink, and lay the cornerstones for a stronger economy by supporting recruitment and retention, new jobs across technology, clean energy, and recreation, all the while bringing Vermont's world-class goods and services to new markets near and far.

Third, a 21st century Vermont is one that is connected by rural broadband.

We will not recover stronger, we will not draw people to Vermont, we will not end our demographic crisis, if we do not act now to close Vermont's broadband gap. The market alone, has not, and will not, ensure access for every Vermonter.

The internet is the electricity of our time. Each day without it is a day without telehealth, remote work, online learning, and economic opportunity.

I look forward to working with you, our rural communities, and federal partners, to get this essential service to all of our communities.

Finally, we must not forget our working lands and environment.

As we know, climate change is a threat to everything that makes Vermont so special and climate action represents the greatest economic opportunity of our time. Our opportunity is to act with the same urgency on climate change as we have in responding to this pandemic and allow science to lead our decisions. We know that an energy-independent future will save families money, create high-paying jobs, and ensure that future generations can know the landscape we love so much.

---

I am inspired by the faith that Vermonters have placed in us, and their trust that we recognize the opportunities before us: to restore faith in good government, to fight for human dignity, to do all

we can to recover stronger from this pandemic, but most of all to put people before politics in our work.

As President Kennedy once said at a time as nearly challenging as this, “[u]nited, there is little we cannot do . . . [d]ivided there is little we can do.”

We know that brighter days are ahead and that we will only reach the horizon together.

I will be with you, day in and day out, in this work and I look forward to working with you, united for a better future.

Thank you and let’s get to work.