In Historic Speech, Johnson Calls for New Federalist Compact

By Paul Leroux

In the first State of the Cities Address ever given by a U.S. Conference of Mayors President, Sacramento Mayor Kevin Johnson took to the podium in Washington (DC) January 21 to announce his vision of a restructured relationship between cities and the federal government. Addressing a crowd of nearly 300 mayors and calling his plan, “a new federalist compact,” Johnson spoke the day after President Obama delivered his State of the Union just two miles away.

“The state of the union is strong because the state of our cities is strong,” Johnson announced at the beginning of his speech. He cited U.S. Conference of Mayors/Zogby survey results that show nearly half of Americans say their cities are on the right track, while only 29 percent think the nation is. He also stressed that American mayors are the most trusted elected officials in the nation.

Despite this generally positive tone, Johnson stated, “Powerful forces are transforming the way people interact with their jobs, their neighborhoods, and their cities.” Among these are globalization, income inequality, major demographic changes, climate change, and what Johnson called, “a growing gulf of mistrust between communities of color and law enforcement.”

While mayors are working in their cities to address each of these forces, Johnson emphasized that it was necessary to rethink the federal-city partnership to truly solve them. “I want to expand on the vision of Cities 3.0, because it’s not just about what we do within our cities, but a 3.0 city also interacts with the federal government in a different way,” he said.

“We need what I’m calling a new federalist compact that recognizes the areas that require federal attention while leveraging and strengthening what truly drives the prosperity in the nation—our cities and metropolitan areas,” Johnson said. In this new partnership, the federal government, “leads where it must, empowers cities where it can, and invests where it should.”

In the domain of leading where it must, Johnson identified four areas where federal action is desperately needed. These are providing a robust safety net for the elderly and the disadvantaged, overhauling the immigration system, funding economy-transforming research and development or new infrastructure, and working to change behavior to combat climate change.

On other issues, Johnson implored the federal government to “empower cities where it can,” designing policies that allow for maximum flexibility from city to city. To highlight areas where cities are taking initiative, Johnson listed a series of prominent best practices, and then challenged mayors to do more, saying, “Imagine how much more we could do if we had a federal government that empowered us rather than hindered us with rules, restrictions, and regulations.”

Johnson’s final call for the federal government to “invest where it should” demanded increased federal funding directly to cities. The role of the federal government is to ensure the U.S. is competitive in an increasingly global world,” he said, “One of the things that will allow America to be more competitive is improving the integrity of our infrastructure.” Johnson argued that cities are the best equipped to identify areas of improvement, but that federal investment was needed to make necessary impact.

This new federalist compact, as articulated by Johnson, would represent a new era of American federalism, just as his “Cities 2.0” platform represents the new era of the American city. With this new paradigm, Johnson said, “Cities can drive the nation to economic and civic heights we’ve never seen.”
President Obama: “If Cities Are Successful, Then America Is Going to be Successful”

By Ed Somers

Almost 250 mayors spent six hours in the White House January 23 to conclude the 83rd Winter Meeting of The U.S. Conference of Mayors.

The afternoon began with the mayors engaging in five breakout sessions in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building with key administration officials on topics including climate protection, trade and exports, health care and veterans housing, workforce development for the information technology and advanced manufacturing areas, and paid sick leave and minimum wage.

The mayors then moved to the East Room of the White House, where they engaged in plenary discussion sessions on the topics of immigration reform and community college/workforce training.

The immigration reform session featured White House Domestic Policy Director Cecilia Muñoz, Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, and Anaheim Mayor Tom Tait, Co-Chair of the Conference of Mayors Immigration Reform Task Force.

The community college/workforce training session was opened by Dr. Jill Biden, Second Lady of the United States, and featured White House Intergovernmental Affairs Director Jerry Abramson and Labor Secretary Thomas E. Perez.

President Obama: Mayors Make Things Happen

As he has done for several years, President Obama concluded the program by speaking to the mayors in an open media session, and then taking questions from mayors in a closed meeting.

Sacramento Mayor President Kevin Johnson was invited to introduce the President, which was a first for a Conference of Mayors President with the Obama White House.

Johnson spoke of how the life-path of President Obama helped motivate him to run for mayor.

“America’s mayors could not have a better friend and ally in the White House,” than President Obama, Johnson said thanking him for opening the White House up to the mayors every year, and for his work on priorities such as equal pay for women, health care reform, ending the war in Iraq, and so much more.

And in a one-of-a-kind final introduction featuring NBA-style hype music, Mayor Johnson deemed President Obama the “point guard of Pennsylvania Avenue.”

President Obama used most of his remarks to thank America’s mayors for the work they are doing on shared priorities. “I think as you’ve seen today, we take our partnership with you seriously because you’re often the place where change happens fastest. That’s one of the reasons why two of my Cabinet members happen to be former mayors; and a former president of this Conference, Jerry Abramson of Louisville, is one of my top advisors,” the President said.

The President commended the work the Mayors’ Maker Challenge “to support local entrepreneurs working to create the industries and jobs of the future,” citing Mayor Greg Fischer and Louisville where “now students and engineers are creating smarter appliances at a community space in town, and hundreds of folks are getting trained for local software development jobs.”

“We’ve worked with some of you to raise the minimum wage without waiting for Congress. And more than 20 cities and counties have stepped up to raise the wage since 2013,” the President said, adding, “Some have passed sick leave

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Former Mayors, Now Top Administration Officials, Discuss Roles, Relationships with Cities

Four former mayors now serving in President Obama’s Cabinet and White House joined Conference of Mayors President Sacramento Mayor Kevin Johnson at the Conference of Mayors Winter Meeting for a January 23 plenary panel that gave each of them an opportunity to discuss federal-city relationships along with how their city hall experience influences their current leadership roles in Washington.

Joining Johnson were Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, former mayor of Mount Pleasant (IA), and former governor of Iowa; Housing and Urban Development Secretary Julian Castro, former mayor of San Antonio; Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx, former mayor of Charlotte (NC); and White House Intergovernmental Affairs Director Jerry Abramson, former mayor of Louisville.

“The people in this room all have something in common,” said Vilsack, “and that is, we have executive personalities. We want to get things done, and we want to see results.” In a sense, he said, “being the Secretary of Agriculture is like being mayor of all the small cities and towns across rural America. It’s, in a sense like being governor of 50 states for rural America because all that you all do as mayors, and that governors do, the Secretary of Agriculture is able to do. It’s a job that I love and it’s a job I’m very prepared for because of my experience as a mayor and a governor.”

Asked to assess how the Obama administration was meeting the needs of cities, Castro said, “What the administration has done better than any before it is to organize itself across the silos, across the departments of the federal government, and to encourage local communities to mirror that at the local level.”

“To the extent that those relationships at the local level take greater hold because of, in part, the work that has been done by the Obama administration, not only are we serving cities well today, but for the long haul, we’re serving cities well over, this was the theme of the President’s remarks and then discussion with the mayors. “On other urgent issues like responding to climate change or getting more families insured, rebuilding infrastructure, making sure that our youngest Americans get the best start in life with quality pre-K – mayors like you are helping to get it done. And we want to help,” the President said adding, “Because if cities are successful, then America is going to be successful.”

And in concluding, the President stressed that, “I can guarantee you that we will not only partner with you aggressively, but we’re also going to be creative and show flexibility. And if you have ideas that don’t neatly fit into what’s already been done, we’re going to try to come up with answers to make sure that you can succeed.”