



The Hon. Lincoln D. Chafee

EDITORS' NOTE On November 2nd, 2010, Lincoln D. Chafee was elected the 74th Governor of Rhode Island. Consistent with the values of Rhode Island's civil society, Governor Chafee has signed marriage equality into law, spearheaded healthcare reform, and launched green infrastructure initiatives – critical ingredients of his long-term vision for a thriving Rhode Island. Last year, Governor Chafee became a Democrat, after concluding that his longtime commitment to the hard-working people of Rhode Island was most aligned with that of President Obama and Democratic Governors throughout the country. As a United States Senator, Governor Chafee fought passionately for a middle-class economic agenda and environmental causes, such as protecting air and water and addressing climate change pollutants. Following his tenure in the U.S. Senate, Governor Chafee spent two years as a Distinguished Visiting Fellow at Brown University's Watson Institute for International Studies, where he wrote *Against the Tide: How a Compliant Congress Empowered a Reckless President*. Governor Chafee is a proud Rhode Islander, born in Warwick. He graduated with a degree in Classics from Brown University, where he received the Francis M. Driscoll Award for leadership, scholarship, and athletics. After graduating, he worked for seven years as a blacksmith at harness racetracks throughout the United States and Canada. Inspired by a commitment to public service and the path of his father John Chafee, Governor Chafee entered politics as an elected delegate to the Rhode Island Constitutional Convention, and subsequently served four years on the Warwick City Council. He was elected to four terms as Mayor of Warwick, and served seven years as a U.S. Senator.

In a state that has gone through a number of challenges, you have been very aggressive about turning things around. How have your changes progressed and where is Rhode Island today in terms of the economic recovery?

We have had a slower recovery than many states, but we are now having our best year in some areas since the unemployment records were first taken in 1976.

A Career of Service

An Interview with
The Honorable Lincoln D. Chafee, Governor of Rhode Island

So we're slow, but this year, we're seeing very positive things in the state.

How much can you really achieve around creating jobs, and what was your area of focus when you considered tackling unemployment issues?

I focused on the three foundations of building a good, strong economy for the long term: first, invest in education – the previous administration had made deep cuts, as many had, to higher education as we had deficits to overcome. I thought this was shortsighted and reversed it. Instead of cuts, I put money into our state institutions of higher education. We have three in Rhode Island: University of Rhode Island, Rhode Island College, and Community College of Rhode Island – all in different tiers of public higher education.

Second, we put money into infrastructure such as our roads and bridges, and also into workforce development programs that help close the skills gap. There were employers looking for people and people looking for work, so we wanted to make sure the state played a role in closing that gap between people looking for work and employers looking for people. It was a long-term strategy – we weren't going to get short-term gratification, but it's paying off now.

Finally, Rhode Island, as with some other states, had a perception of corruption, and it has been very important to have a highly-ethical, clean administration, and we have done that.

You've been vocal about transparency. Have those efforts made a difference and is that negative perception changing?

It is. It's a long-term process. You don't turn around perceptions that people have about Rhode Island overnight. We're a small state and everyone knows each other but, with prosecutions of several public officials, the word is getting out that we're cleaning up our state.

How critical is it to recognize the educational problems in the U.S.?

The reality is that it comes down to resources. If you're going to make a difference, you have to put the resources into this area. We have done that in higher education, but also in aid to cities and towns, which goes directly to public schools. Every year, I make a strong commitment – and with the support of the general assembly – put more resources into education.

How is regulatory reform progressing and has it had the impact you had hoped it would?

We always are trying to walk the fine line between protecting the environment and protecting safety, and avoiding over-burdensome regulations.

We have made a big effort to go through every department and all of their regulations, and take another look at them. I don't think it takes earth-shattering changes in this area. We're firmly committed to protecting the environment and public safety, and we will clean up where we can. The constituents know that we're looking at regulations and how we can make them better.

How about healthcare within the state and healthcare reform more broadly?

We're very aware that it is a burden on employers to provide coverage, and it even is for government. We have soaring costs as we provide our employees with healthcare coverage.

I was a firm proponent of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), and attempts made to reform this through the ACA. Rhode Island has led the way, either as the top two or three, if not the top state, in number of people signing up and the smoothness of the rollout. We have a great team for the ACA – the Lieutenant Governor has been very involved in this area, and it is one of several where we're leading the country.

How critical is the public/private partnership in terms of addressing the challenges facing the state?

I'm a small government person in this area. I like to focus on the basics and let the private sector do what they have to do to prosper and stay out of their way. We have to provide them with an educated workforce, give them good roads and bridges, fiber-optics, and other infrastructure needs the government is generally tasked with providing, as well as help them with internships and getting employees through workforce development. These are the things I focus on to help the private sector; then, I stay out of their way.

What needs to be done to break the gridlock in Washington and are you optimistic that both sides can come together?

The country is so divided, and there are different philosophies in the southern and mountain states about the role of government, but I am optimistic. I'm a Democrat now and just to be partisan, I think the democrats have to make the point that the government can be a force for good in people's lives. If we state this premise strongly and effectively, and have a good landslide election, it will be just what the country needs. ●