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Make North Carolina the freest state

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RALEIGH — Do political movements ever really accomplish anything? The English writer G.K. Chesterton had his doubts.

“The whole modern world has divided itself into Conservatives and Progressives,” he wrote in 1924. “The business of Progressives is to go on making mistakes. The business of the Conservatives is to prevent the mistakes from being corrected.”

I have always appreciated Chesterton’s wit and insight. But he was unduly pessimistic, as North Carolina’s experience over the last eight years can attest.

To most conservatives, that experience feels like one of tremendous successes. Many public policies we advocated for decades — government reorganization, sound budgeting, tax relief, regulatory reform, choice and competition in education — are no longer just aspirations. They are either accomplished or underway.

According to the Tax Foundation, for example, North Carolina used to have one of the nation’s most anti-growth tax codes. Today, our tax system is 12th-best. The Frasier Institute has long rated states according to economic freedom, including both fiscal and regulatory variables. North Carolina ranks 18th in economic freedom, versus 25th in 2010.

Another think tank that publishes freedom ratings, the Cato Institute, ranks North Carolina sixth in the country in educational freedom, reflecting our mix of policies that extend and protect parents’ ability to choose the best school for their children. Cato also rates North Carolina relatively highly on criminal justice (17th in the nation and first in the Southeast) and labor-market freedom (11th).

As a conservative, I see progress. Progressives, from their perspective, do not. At least we can agree there has been a lot of change under a Republican-controlled General Assembly.

So, what’s next? The think tank I co-founded and for which I still serve as board chairman, the John Locke Foundation, set our own goal some years ago. Ultimately, we want North Carolina to be “First in Freedom,” as some license plates now read. Not 17th or 12th or even sixth. We want to be the freest state in the union.

Getting there will require a lot more work. Despite recent progress, North Carolina continues to overtax, overregulate, overcentralize and rely too heavily on outdated monopolies and cartels rather than competitive markets to deliver critical services to the public. In their new briefing

book, “North Carolina Policy Solutions 2018,” my JLF colleagues have laid out an ambitious reform agenda for the coming years.

One common theme is removing barriers. North Carolina makes it too hard for innovators to start new businesses, for residents to begin new careers, for health providers and insurers to give patients more choices, for nurses to deliver high-quality care at reasonable prices, for educators to offer parents more options and for brewers and distillers to sell their products to willing consumers.

Another common theme is protecting rights. Unlike many states, North Carolina has yet to amend its constitution to deter eminent-domain abuse — to keep governments from taking private property not for public use but instead to transfer to other private parties. We also need to do more to reform our systems of civil and criminal justice.

Still another theme is economy in government. We should extend North Carolina’s recent practice of keeping a lid on spending growth, building up budget reserves and rooting out waste and special-interest subsidies. We should get the state out of enterprises it shouldn’t be in, such as selling alcohol and encouraging people to gamble, while improving the cost-effectiveness and quality of longtime state enterprises such as roads.

Modern conservatism — which is really a fusion of traditionalism and classical liberalism — isn’t about resisting reform. It champions reform. It assumes the future can be better than the present or the past, but only if, as G.K. Chesterton himself observed, we accept timeless truths about human nature.

Progressive reformers, he wrote, “destroy conventions by appealing to fads.” Conservatives seek to reform by “appealing to facts that are older than conventions.”

One of those facts is that freedom is both a birthright and a practical solution. It works. North Carolina needs still more of it.