



## Saslaw maligned gun-rights supporters, all rural Virginians

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Shame on Virginia Senate Majority Leader Dick Saslaw.

A man who has spent the better part of three decades in the legislature in Richmond ought to have more sense than to insult any state resident – let alone an entire group of them.

Saslaw, a Northern Virginia businessman and the leader of the newly minted Democratic majority, is in hot water for an ill-considered remark on an elevator at the capitol last week. His comments were either an insult to gun-rights supporters or rural voters or both.

NO MATTER who was the target, the remarks were certainly not statesmanlike. Saslaw should apologize.

The senator's snide aside was overheard by Bristol Virginia resident John Pierce, a computer software developer who traveled to Richmond as part of a delegation from the Virginia Citizens Defense League. About 400 league members were in Richmond to lobby their lawmakers and to protest a potential change to the state's gun laws.

In an e-mail, which is rocketing around the Internet, Pierce described the incident:

"Senator Saslaw ... and a companion entered the elevator. ... He loudly continued his discussion with his companion. The next words out of his mouth were the most disrespectful words I have ever heard spoken openly by a Virginia legislator about his constituency."

According to Pierce, Saslaw said, "I see we're debating a gun bill today. Half of the cast of 'Deliverance' is in town."

"DELIVERANCE" is a 1970s era film based on a novel by James Dickey. In it, a group of Atlanta businessmen encounters a backwoods Appalachian culture during a canoe trip in the North Georgia Mountains. The movie's plot involves rape and murder.

A "Deliverance" crack delivered by a Northern Virginia businessman and directed at rural Virginians should incense all state residents. The remark simply drips with prejudice.

Pierce, who grew up in rural Grayson County but attended college and graduate school in Northern Virginia, agrees.

"I really think most of the people in Southwest Virginia, even working people who didn't have the opportunity

to go to school that I did, do not match the stereotype of 'Deliverance.' That's not just rural. That's about rape and murder," Pierce told me Friday. "[Saslaw] didn't say, 'It looks like there's a Jeff Foxworthy concert in town.' He compared us to murderers and rapists who are almost sub-human."

FOR PIERCE, an ardent Second Amendment supporter, the conflict with Saslaw is very much about guns. Pierce describes Saslaw as a gun-control advocate with a low opinion of those who don't share his views.

"I believe he truly feels that gun owners are bad people," Pierce said.

Pierce's assessment might be correct. But this isn't just about guns – a subject on which reasonable people hold a variety of opinions. It's about respect. Even if they don't agree with their constituents, lawmakers are obliged to treat them with a certain amount of courtesy and decorum. Saslaw broke the rules.

Pierce's reaction to the senator's comments is understandable.

"I WAS sickened," he wrote. "Sen. Saslaw has made it abundantly clear over the years that he has nothing but disdain for gun rights. But apparently this disdain extends to anyone who does not live in his elitist world."

Since the controversy began, Saslaw has hunkered down and refused to talk to reporters. He didn't return this newspaper's phone calls. Perhaps he assumes the matter will blow over in time. Or perhaps his disdain extends to newspapers in the Southwest corner of the state.

He's making a mistake. Southwest Virginia residents – and rural state residents, in general – deserve the same consideration as those who live in the rarefied atmosphere that surrounds the nation's capital.

Saslaw ought to respond and apologize. If he doesn't, his fellow Democrats should hold him to account or, at a minimum, aver that they don't hold the same low opinion of rural residents.

STATE RESIDENTS go to Richmond all the time to lobby lawmakers. On the same day that Pierce and the Virginia Citizens Defense League were there, hundreds of supporters of gun restrictions staged a "lie in" on the grounds. Both groups – the gun-rights demonstrators and the opposition – were engaging in the constitutionally protected practice of political protest. They were seeking a powerful way to make point, whether by lying on the ground or wearing "Guns Save Lives" stickers.

On the same day, other state residents gathered to rally support for a clean energy bill, although their demonstration was largely overshadowed by the gun-related protests. They, too, were exercising their rights.

This is democracy at work.

Lawmakers don't have to agree with protesters' positions. But they owe them the courtesy of listening and the respect they would accord their colleagues.

Insulting rural voters or residents of Appalachia is appalling behavior for a senator. Saslaw needs to be man enough to admit his mistake.

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