

Transcript of 'The Elephant in the Dome' Podcast – January 15

(Official podcast of the Washington State Senate Republican Caucus)

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Guest: Senate Republican Leader John Braun

Disclaimer: This transcript is based on provided captions and may not be 100% verbatim. Minor edits were made for clarity and readability.

Tracy Ellis: Welcome to The Elephant in the Dome, the official podcast of the Washington State Senate Republican Caucus. I'm Tracy Ellis with Senate Republican Leader John Braun. The governor gave his State of the State speech. He says the state of the state is strong. What did you make of his speech?

John Braun: It wasn't as impactful as last year's. Then, he painted a picture of a fiscally cautious—if not conservative—new governor who wanted to get our fiscal house in order, reform state government, and even reached across the aisle. But much of that didn't happen. He caved on spending, signing record new taxes. This year's speech was less ambitious, sticking to Democratic talking points. He wasn't hostile to Republicans, but he took swipes at the federal government that I thought were unwarranted. The bills he supports are mostly bipartisan measures that would pass anyway—safe bets, less risk-taking.

Tracy Ellis: He's embracing an income tax fully. That came up in the speech.

John Braun: Yes, he doubled down. He admits this tax hits small and medium businesses, putting them at a disadvantage. He suggested offsets, but I hear those won't happen. It's a "do this now, maybe help later" approach—even Democrats like Rep. Larry Springer say don't believe that. Voters have rejected an income tax repeatedly—ten times, eleven if you count the initiative.

Tracy Ellis: He also brought up federal issues. Was that necessary?

John Braun: No. It was harmful. He suggested Washington should side against law and order and pass laws to push back against federal enforcement—likely unconstitutional. That undermines democracy. Laws exist at state and federal levels; we should follow them. Suggesting harassment of law enforcement is deeply wrong and will do great harm. Public safety is already a problem—retail theft is worst in the country, homicide and violent crime are up. Undermining law enforcement credibility is dangerous.

Tracy Ellis: What's his tone with you in meetings?

John Braun: Polite, listens, but rarely commits. Historically, he listens and then does what the Democratic base wants. He hasn't shown independence from the far-left progressive base.

Tracy Ellis: Bills are getting hearings. Anything beyond budget and taxes that concerns you?

John Braun: Plenty. Progressive bills undermine law enforcement, reduce sentences, prioritize criminals over victims. We want rehabilitation, but there must be consequences for violent crime. Democrats want to undo the three-strikes law. We heard compelling testimony from a victim's family member—her grandmother was killed by an eight-time felon. These bills disregard victims and weaken law and order.

(Victim testimony played)

John Braun: Very compelling. It shows Democrats siding with criminals. That's wrong personally and for society. Other concerns include the income tax bill and an environmental crimes bill that would make building anything nearly impossible—hurting clean energy goals and creating a cottage industry for trial attorneys.

Tracy Ellis: You spoke to KOMO News about daycare fraud.

John Braun: Fraud concerns are credible and deserve investigation. If true, it's bad for taxpayers; if false, we need transparency to restore trust. Democrats' reaction was to hunker down, which is wrong. We've also seen fraud in mortgage assistance and paid family leave programs. Allowing fraud jeopardizes these systems.

Tracy Ellis: How do you keep battles from becoming personal?

John Braun: Attack ideas, not people. Understand opponents come from different places. Fight bad ideas with better ideas. Be professional—there's always another vote, and we may find common ground next time.

Tracy Ellis: Transportation was a big part of the governor's speech. Crisis?

John Braun: Yes. Transportation is in worse shape than the operating budget. Ferries have been neglected for decades. Funding is a major issue—the gas tax is already among the highest, and cap-and-trade doubled it. We propose shifting vehicle sales tax to transportation for stable funding. The governor wants more bonding, which is wrong. We've already bonded gas tax revenue for decades, leaving little flexibility. Bonding more is short-term and harmful. We need bold solutions, not piecemeal fixes.

Tracy Ellis: He mentioned potholes and maintenance.

John Braun: Billions in delayed maintenance. Ignoring it turns inconvenience into hazard, especially with bridges.

Tracy Ellis: Republicans have some say on bonds, right?

John Braun: Technically, it's 60% to pass bonds, and Democrats have that. But they've worked bipartisan on transportation and capital budgets—though only to a point.

Tracy Ellis: Budget issues—any agreement?

John Braun: We hope no new spending, but Democrats added 8% last year despite deficits. We have a \$4.3 billion deficit now. Republicans are committed to no new taxes. We can deliver essential services within existing revenues. Last year we proposed a balanced budget without new taxes. We'll offer ideas again.

Tracy Ellis: Employee raises last year—\$4 billion—impact?

John Braun: Yes. Raises negotiated in secret with the governor were unaffordable and contributed to today's shortfall. State employees are already well-compensated compared to private sector. Legislature could have rejected those contracts but didn't. Now we're stuck.

Tracy Ellis: It's a short session—60 days—but packed. We'll talk weekly. Senator Braun, thank you.

John Braun: Thank you.

Tracy Ellis: And thank you for listening to The Elephant in the Dome, the official podcast of the Washington State Senate Republican Caucus.