

Report on the NCSL Legislative Summit 2025, Boston

Arrival and Atmosphere

Conferences often look alike from the outside: lanyards at the door, paper cups of coffee, hurried conversations in between rooms that could be anywhere. But the NCSL Legislative Summit in Boston was something different. It was the 50th anniversary of the National Conference of State Legislatures, and the scale alone — over 9,000 registered participants, with thousands of legislators — was enough to give it a certain gravity.

Boston's Convention Centre felt less like a meeting hall and more like a civic agora: state legislators from every corner of America, staffers with clipboards, policy experts clutching briefing packs, and, this year, a record 326 international delegates from more than twenty countries. For the second year, Wales had a place among them — though I was the only legislator from the United Kingdom present.

It was impossible not to notice the mix of the ordinary and the extraordinary. On the walk from my hotel to the Convention Centre, I passed families queuing for whale-watching tours on the harbour. Inside, the conversation was about tariffs, critical minerals, blockchain, juvenile justice, and the survival of democracy itself.

The International Legislative Advisory Council

The Summit opened with the International Legislative Advisory Council (ILAC), a new forum for NCSL's international partners. The council brings together representatives from legislatures across the world, many of whom are associate members of NCSL, including Canadian provinces, European parliaments, and African assemblies, alongside US state legislators.

Trade dominated the early discussion. A representative of the European Union delegation in Washington briefed us on the new U.S.–EU trade framework, with its uneasy mix of digital regulation, tariffs, and critical minerals supply chains. Legislators from Louisiana described their growing links with Ireland — a reminder that globalisation is often stitched together by partnerships between parliaments, not just through national governments alone.

Colleagues from Ghana spoke with candour about the risks of executive dominance in young democracies, and the value of exposure to legislative best practice. Their point was simple: democracy cannot survive without legislatures that have the capacity and confidence to check governments.

In my own intervention, I proposed that NCSL consider convening a global forum for devolved and subnational legislatures. While national parliaments have the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association does include regional and devolved legislatures among its members, there is no truly global body dedicated to this tier of governance. Legislatures like the Senedd in Wales, Quebec's

National Assembly, or Alberta's Legislative Assembly are not sovereign, yet they are responsible for most of the decisions that shape citizens' daily lives — health, education, transport, environment. They deserve a global voice of their own. The idea found interest around the table — a reminder that the world of parliaments is larger, and more varied, than the map of states suggests.

The mood in the room was one of solidarity: whether in Accra, Alberta or Ammanford, the problems we face — climate change, digital disruption, economic resilience — are shared, and the answers may be found more readily when legislatures learn from one another.

Opening Plenary: A Gathering Shadow

On Monday morning the Summit formally began. The Opening Plenary was staged with the theatre of American politics — music, flags, a roll call of states and nations. But it was overshadowed by grief. Delegates stood in silence to honour Melissa Hortman, Speaker of the Minnesota House, murdered earlier in the summer alongside her husband, and Senator John Hoffman, critically wounded in the same attack.

The tributes that followed were raw and moving. Colleagues spoke of Hortman's civility and courage, her insistence on respect across party lines, and her death was framed as a reminder that democracy is not an abstraction but a human endeavour carried out by men and women who sometimes pay the ultimate price.

Robin Vos, Speaker of the Wisconsin Assembly, and broadcaster Michael Smerconish took up the theme in conversation: the coarsening of discourse, the role of polarised media, the violence seeping into political life. Their message was blunt: legislatures, especially at state level, are among the last places in America where people still work across divides. Protecting that space is itself an act of leadership.

Then Gabby Giffords entered the stage. The former Congresswoman, shot in 2011 and still bearing the physical effects of that attack, spoke haltingly but powerfully. "I will never give up," she said. "You must not either. Strive for a better world." The hall rose to its feet in a standing ovation that felt more like a vow than applause.

For me, two truths crystallised in that moment. First, the extraordinary nature of what we were witnessing: the largest gathering of American legislators in the nation's history, a testament to the enduring vitality of democratic exchange. Second, the urgency of protecting our own institutions in Wales — where civility, honesty, and resilience are just as essential if democracy is to endure.

Democracy and the "Mingle Project"

Smerconish returned in a later session under the banner of The Mingle Project. His theme was the erosion of social capital: Americans no longer bowl in leagues, join civic clubs, or even attend local events in the same numbers. The decline began after

Vietnam, accelerated with the internet in the mid-1990s, and collapsed into something steeper with the smartphone era after 2012.

The result is a society of "self-sorting": the famous divide between "Cracker Barrel counties" and "Whole Foods counties", where lifestyle and politics align so tightly that fewer Americans encounter people unlike themselves. Democracy depends less on constitutions than on neighbours seeing one another — when that ceases, politics becomes brittle. National media profits from outrage, while local media — once the binding agent of civic life — has withered.

The solutions were deliberately modest yet concrete: rebuild "third places" like libraries and school halls; revive civic service; encourage hybrid work so that mentoring and cross-background contact can happen again; use technology to coax people offline rather than trap them online. "Schools," he reminded us, "are the last universal meeting ground."

The point was sobering. Democracy's health rests on dense local networks that have thinned significantly. When neighbours become strangers, institutions follow.

A Partisan Interlude: Governor Pritzker

Over lunch, I joined a caucus event for Democratic legislators. Governor J.B. Pritzker of Illinois delivered a forceful defence of civil liberties, accusing the Trump administration of undermining habeas corpus through immigration enforcement tactics. He spoke of children detained to coerce parents, of the American constitutional tradition stretching back to Magna Carta, and of the danger of confusing disruption with competence.

The rhetoric was fiery, the mood combative — a stark contrast to the bipartisan tone of the plenary. Yet underneath was the same theme: that democracy rests on due process, constraint of executive power, and the basic competence of government to govern.

Technology and Its Discontents

Artificial Intelligence: Walking the Tightrope

A session on AI regulation was striking for its pragmatism. Utah has chosen not to regulate model development — recognising its borderless, global character — but to focus on applications that touch the public. Citizens interacting with an AI in healthcare or finance must be told so; companies deploying AI in high-risk domains face new duties.

Virginia has legislated for algorithmic impact assessments, akin to environmental impact assessments but for bias and discrimination. Arkansas has required a "human in the loop" for government decisions: no algorithm can be the final arbiter.

Massachusetts, meanwhile, has invested \$100 million in an AI hub, tying the technology to the state's biotech strengths.

The theme was one of cautious enablement: legislate narrowly, pilot widely, and never forget that "doing nothing is also a choice."

AI Inside the Legislature

Another panel revealed how legislative staff themselves are already using generative AI to draft, summarise, translate, and code. Minnesota's IT staff demonstrated how small teams can multiply their productivity; Washington State showed the importance of acceptable-use policies before shadow practices proliferate. Procurement clauses and data governance emerged as the unglamorous but essential foundations.

The metaphor that recurred was "power tools": dangerous if misused, transformative when handled with skill.

Children, Screens, and the Public Health Crisis

Perhaps the most urgent of the tech panels focused on young people. Researchers and youth advocates painted a stark picture: childhood displaced from play to phones, with measurable rises in depression and anxiety, especially among girls. The statistics were sobering — Snapchat reports approximately 10,000 sextortion cases monthly; one in three teen girls say Instagram worsens their body image; one in eight young teens reported unwanted sexual advances on Instagram in the past week. The average teenager spends five hours daily on social media, time that once went to sleep, play, and in-person friendship.

The call was for product design responsibility, not parental willpower: privacy-by-default, age-appropriate design codes, bans on targeted advertising to minors, and phone-free schools. It was striking to hear industry representatives acknowledge the problem and cautiously endorse some of the measures.

For Wales, the echoes are clear: schools as sanctuaries, regulation as design, and youth voices as indispensable in policymaking.

Economic Development: Lessons from History

The session on U.S. economic development traced a line from the Erie Canal to the iPhone. The point was that America's strength has always rested on a blend of public investment, infrastructure, and selective protectionism. Federal defence contracts drove microchip prices down from \$32 to \$1.25 in a single decade, enabling the personal computer revolution. The iPhone today is a bundle of technologies — GPS, touchscreen, the internet — all seeded by public research.

Tariffs in the 19th century shielded infant industries until they could compete. Federal defence contracts in the 20th century created the demand that drove innovation. The iPhone today is a bundle of technologies — GPS, touchscreen, the internet — all seeded by public research.

The diagnosis of present weakness was sharp: underinvestment in R&D, offshoring, a trade deficit of nearly a trillion dollars, and China's rise through sustained industrial policy. The prescription: pick strategic sectors, invest at scale, create guaranteed demand through public procurement, and retrain the workforce.

I intervened to raise a different perspective. While the focus on goods was understandable, America maintains a significant surplus in services — intellectual property, digital services, finance — what economist Ricardo Hausmann calls the "dark matter" that often escapes traditional trade statistics. The risk, I suggested, was that aggressive protectionism in goods might trigger retaliation in precisely those service sectors where the U.S. and its allies hold their deepest competitive advantages. The discussion that followed acknowledged this complexity: trade balances encompass not just steel and silicon, but software, finance, and the movement of ideas. In focusing so intently on tangible goods, were we risking our intangible strengths?

Innovation and Community Health

In a workshop on health innovation, the personal and the political collided. A Black queer minister from Boston spoke of the stigma still attached to HIV prevention, and of finding affirmation at Fenway Health, a community-based clinic. A former senator described the survival of his premature twins, weighing barely a pound each, thanks to therapies still in trial stages.

The lesson was that innovation is not just molecules but models: trusted messengers, whole-person care, and the cultural competence to reach those most in need. Massachusetts' billion-dollar life sciences investment was held up as an example of how state policy can build not just an industry but a patient ecosystem.

It was a reminder that value is not just cost-effectiveness but trust, access, and human dignity.

Juvenile Justice: Credible Messengers

Few sessions resonated more than the one on juvenile justice. Boston's Operation Ceasefire was revisited: its success lay not in grand theories but in its precision. A small group of young people, at very high risk, were confronted with swift consequences but also real alternatives, delivered by people they trusted — "credible messengers" who had walked similar paths themselves. The message: focus works.

Cambridge's Safety Net programme showed how blending budgets and expertise across schools, police, and social services could close the familiar gaps. Restorative justice was presented not as sentiment but as measurable: victims report higher satisfaction; reoffending rates fall.

Maryland's Child Interrogation Protection Act, requiring lawyer consultation before questioning minors, was explained as a safeguard against false confessions, not an

indulgence. Adolescent brains process risk and reward differently; they'll say anything to leave the room. Kentucky's long reform arc — from unifying the juvenile code to embedding evaluation into statute — underlined the importance of measuring, adjusting, and persevering.

The lesson was threefold: recruit and support credible messengers; design interventions around the small, high-risk cohort; and normalise restorative routes. The emphasis was always on trust, focus, and evidence.

The Challenge of Change

Shankar Vedantam's plenary on the psychology of change was both entertaining and unsettling. Why do good ideas fail? Because humans are attached to the status quo, overvalue what they have built (the IKEA effect), and fall prey to sunk costs.

His solutions were practical: make the better option the default; reward small moves toward change; and most cleverly, ask sceptics to teach the new practice to others — the act of teaching makes them convince themselves. Sometimes the only route is to make change unavoidable — Canada's successful dollar coin (the "loonie") worked because the paper dollar was withdrawn entirely, while the United States kept both options and saw little change. He spoke of penalty-kick goalkeepers diving left or right to avoid blame when the optimal choice is to stand still, and of the need to "live backwards" — give your best time to ten-year goals before today's distractions.

It was a session less about politics than about people, but the implications for policy design in Wales were plain: build reforms that are visible, irreversible, and easy to implement; reward those who move first; and require people to teach the new approach — making them advocates through the act of explaining.

Blockchain and Digital Identity

The blockchain session was mercifully free of hype. Estonia's success was clarified: the real backbone is X-Road, a secure data exchange system; blockchain is just an audit layer. California's DMV has already moved millions of vehicle titles to a blockchain registry, cutting fraud and paperwork. Counties are piloting blockchain for vital records, universities for transcripts, supply chains for food provenance.

The most striking discussion was about digital identity. In an era of deepfakes, the question is no longer "who do I trust?" but "who can I verify?". The consensus pointed towards state-endorsed but citizen-controlled identity, capable of selective disclosure — proving you're over eighteen without revealing your address. Utah's experiments with minor permits — food handler cards, off-road licences — showed a safe starting point.

The lesson: don't blockchain everything. Build interoperable data rails first, add immutable audit layers where useful, and move step by step towards privacy-preserving digital identity.

Leadership for the Infinite Game

The final seminar distilled Simon Sinek's idea of the "infinite game". Politics, it argued, is not about permanent victory but about outlasting, adapting, and improving. The three requirements are a Just Cause worth decades of effort, a Worthy Rival whose strengths expose your weaknesses, and Existential Flexibility — the willingness to reinvent before decline sets in.

It was liberating to hear politics framed not as a contest to be won but as a game to be sustained. For a small nation like Wales, the insight is obvious: survival, adaptation, and steady improvement are themselves victories. *R'yn Ni Yma O Hyd!*

Conclusion: A Base Camp, Not a Summit

The NCSL called its Boston gathering a Summit. It felt, in truth, more like a base camp: a place to stock up on ideas, to compare maps with other climbers, and to choose a route.

Across the week, the themes repeated: democracy is fragile but resilient; trust is the real infrastructure; technology must be tamed but not feared; and leadership is measured not by short-term wins but by endurance.

For Wales, the value was clear: visibility in an international network of legislatures, and insights we can adapt to our own scale and circumstances. But the real measure is not the richness of the conference hall but what happens afterwards — whether the lessons survive re-entry into daily politics.

I left Boston with the sense that democracy's challenges are shared, and so must be its solutions. The climb is ours, but the company on the mountain is larger than we sometimes imagine.