In the past year an alliance of 16 business groups has formed a Coalition for Virginia’s Future. Among the groups represented in this Coalition are the Virginia Chamber of Commerce, the Virginia Manufacturers Association, the Virginia Retail Merchants Association, the Virginia Business Higher Education Council, the Northern Virginia Technology Council, and several local Chambers of Commerce. (Information on the Coalition appears at www.vachamber.com.)

The mission of this Coalition is to work together with the Governor and the General Assembly to promote what Coalition members think are desirable policies for transportation, education, public safety, and taxation. The Coalition seeks to create a “collaborative partnership” with state officials to promote improvement of education, transportation, and public safety within Virginia. Taxation falls within the purview of the Coalition because promotion of the Coalition’s mission will cost lots of money. Transportation alone was cited as calling for “tens of billions of dollars worth of improvements.”

There is, of course, nothing wrong with people of all sorts contributing their say to the course of public discussion. Doing so is central to democratic governance. To be sure, there is a good deal of argument and evidence currently available that supports policy positions pretty much the opposite of those that the Coalition supports. For instance, the big government answer to transportation is more roads and subsidies for public transit. Yet, there is much analysis and supporting argument that supports the superiority of such things as
pricing schemes for highways, which would reduce congestion by distributing traffic more evenly throughout the day. This approach, however, would involve less government and not more. No doubt, much of the added expenditures the Coalition envisions would flow through the various businesses that comprise the Coalition.

What is particularly interesting about this Coalition is not its particular, standard liberal policy positions, but is what its formation says about contending theories of democratic governance. It is common to address the relationship between government and business from a populist framework. People are supposed to participate equally in their governance, and government protects against the dominance of governance by large business.

A cooperative alliance between business and government most certainly does not fit the populist model of democracy. It does, however, fit the oligarchic model. This model asserts that in democratic governance, the well-organized few necessarily and inevitably dominate the unorganized or poorly-organized many.

The mythology of democratic equality clashes with the reality of democratic oligarchy. The nature of this clash resides in nothing more complicated than the arithmetic of time. How can Virginians participate equally in deliberations on matters of public interest? The obvious answer is that they can’t. Suppose we ask what would be required to give each Virginian a say on some public issue? There are roughly 4,800,000 Virginians of voting age. To
give each of them just one minute to be heard would require 80,000 hours to hear everyone. This is 40 years of full time work.

We might simplify the problem by selecting 120 people at random, a number slightly less than the combined membership of the General Assembly, and let these people do the deliberating. To be sure, this is not equal participation for all, but selected participation for a few. If we now give each person 20 minutes to be heard on some particular issue, it will take 40 hours to hear everyone. And this is but one issue among many that is on the public agenda. Moreover, it is one thing to speak, but it is quite another thing to be heard. People are busy with many things to do, which intensifies the impossibility of anything approaching an equal access to the public agenda.

There can be no equality of access to the public agenda. The simple arithmetic of the situation shows this to be impossible. Access for some must come at the expense of access for the others. Those who succeed in the competition for access will be well organized interest groups. Oligarchic rule is a way of life, regardless of the form of government.

In democratic oligarchy, there is a relationship of mutuality among politicians and large businesses. There can be no doubt that taxes are easier to collect in the presence of a relatively few number of large corporations than they would be in the presence mostly of small businesses. The centralization of information in large businesses clearly eases the collection of taxes and the enforcement of regulations. Large businesses are handmaidens of large
government, and the Coalition for Virginia’s Future is eagerly seeking to expand its participation in this process of democratic oligarchy.