

Opinion: Sweeney wants to reassert NJ legislators' role. Murphy would be wise to accede

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Democratic lawmakers are restive over the governor's yearlong use of executive orders



Carl Golden

When Senate President Steve Sweeney (D-Gloucester) suggested the time had come for greater involvement of the Legislature in setting policy to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, it reflected the increasing restiveness among his members over Gov. Phil Murphy's nearly yearlong use of his executive order authority to guide the state's response.

The administration would be wise to take his words seriously.

The presumptive Republican nominee for governor, Jack Ciattarelli, and a number of legislative Republicans have stepped up their criticism of Murphy, accusing him of governing by fiat and shutting the Legislature out of the process.

Their attacks are open to rebuttal as typical election-year rhetoric and nitpicking. Not so with Sweeney's remarks.

It is clear from the Senate president's comments that his members are feeling the heat from their constituents — business owners who have suffered substantial economic hardship from extended lockdowns; frustrated and annoyed parents whose children have been out of classrooms for the better part of the academic year; and those who are weary and angry over not being able to patronize a restaurant or attend concerts, athletic events and entertainment venues.

It is apparent as well that New Jerseyans suffering from pandemic fatigue have turned increasingly to their legislators for relief and to urge them to overrule what they consider to be overly harsh and unnecessary restrictions imposed unilaterally by the governor.

Discontent in the ranks

Sweeney gave voice to the discontent bubbling among his members when he said: “A lot of us in the Legislature would like to not continue these executive actions and start moving forward back to where we’re participating and partnering even further than we are.”

These were not off-the-cuff musings on Sweeney’s part; rather, they represented a carefully thought-out indication that restoring the Legislature to its traditional and constitutional role as co-equal is in order.

Sweeney has turned aside Republican efforts to impose a 14-day limit on the governor’s executive orders and, in his remarks, complimented Murphy for his leadership and management of the state’s response to the pandemic.

Murphy declared a public health emergency in March of 2020 when the coronavirus began to spread and has renewed it every 30 days since then. Under the authority granted him under the emergency order, Murphy has imposed closures and restrictions which dramatically altered normal life.

He continues to enjoy majority support for his actions thus far, primarily attributable to the willingness of the public to set aside their grievances — hopefully temporarily — in favor of protecting themselves from a disease which has infected more than three-quarters of a million people and killed some 25,000 in New Jersey.

It may be castor oil politics, but it is accepted as doctor’s orders delivered by a governor on the advice of public health experts.

Heeding Sweeney’s call

It will be in the administration’s best interest to heed Sweeney’s call for greater legislative involvement, whether it is consultation or approval.

Republican criticisms will certainly mount as serious election campaigning begins in a few months and Murphy will be able to fend them off as partisan sniping in a year when the governor’s office and the 120-seat Legislature will appear on the ballot.

Should, however, Democrats — even a handful — break ranks and join in the criticism that Murphy has moved too slowly toward lifting restrictions, for instance,

and has inflicted serious and lasting damage on the business community, it will cease to be partisan fault-finding.

The unity he's enjoyed is reasonably solid but dismissing Sweeney's call for greater legislative involvement will most certainly produce fault lines which Republicans can exploit.

The Murphy-Sweeney relationship has been rocky at times, marked by high-profile differences over tax policy and reform of public employee benefits.

Murphy and Norcross

It hit a low point two years ago when a highly public and bitter controversy erupted between Murphy and South Jersey political leader George Norcross, a longtime Sweeney confidant, over the awarding by the Economic Development Authority of hundreds of millions of dollars in tax breaks to entities in which Norcross held an interest and to his business associates.

The administration suggested favoritism and corruption were involved in the awards process and bitter denunciations flew back and forth from Camden to Trenton for months, culminating in a Norcross threat to mount a primary campaign against Murphy.

While cooler heads eventually prevailed, political figures all possess long memories and often nurse grudges, held in check only by the overriding need to smooth things over and play the long game.

Murphy and Norcross aren't about to break bread together anytime soon but, in both of their interests, they're not about to break heads, either.

While Murphy remains a favorite for reelection and it is virtually certain Democrats will maintain control of the Legislature, a united front in the battle to eradicate COVID-19 is crucial.

Sweeney stands to become the longest-serving Senate president next year, a clear sign he enjoys broad, if not unanimous support, of his members, a result not lost on the administration.

With his call for a reassertion of legislative prerogatives, he reached out his hand to the governor.

Slapping it away would be the equivalent of a smack in the chops. And nothing good can come from doing that to an ironworker.

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