

Opinion: In Trenton: 'Tis the political season of giving

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(Photo: Ricardo Kaulesar/NorthJersey.com)

It's no accident that the greatest season of gift-giving coincides with the lame duck session of the Legislature and the final weeks of a departing governor.

Traditionally, the period between an election and the inauguration of a new governor involves a last minute – or last ditch – rush of legislation, nominations and appointments, and granting rewards to those who've been faithful and supportive of the administration's agenda over the years.

While a last-minute flurry of activity is commonplace, Governor Christie and state Senate President Steve Sweeney, D-Gloucester, have raised the bar to a new level this year.

Murphy: [Phil Murphy has big plans for education, but can he deliver? \(/story/news/2017/12/14/phil-murphy-education-funding/923802001/\)](#)

NJ Transit: [Gov.-elect Phil Murphy calls NJ Transit 'national disgrace' \(/story/news/watchdog/2017/12/20/phil-murphy-calls-nj-transit-national-disgrace/968500001/\)](#)

Editorial: [Editorial: Christie's lasting legacy of second chances \(/story/opinion/editorials/2017/12/21/editorial-christies-lasting-legacy-second-chances/974317001/\)](#)

Editorial: [Editorial: NJ Transit became Christie's new Port Authority \(/story/opinion/editorials/2017/12/18/nj-transit-became-christies-new-port-authority/961986001/\)](#)

After eight years of bemoaning the sorry fiscal condition of the public pension system and predicting its impending insolvency, Sweeney bulled ahead with legislation to restore membership to a handful of elected officials, boosting their retirement benefits.

The legislation tore through committee at warp speed – no public hearings, perfunctory debate, for instance – while denying opponents any opportunity to challenge the wisdom of expanding a system already in distress and on track to consume a steadily growing percentage of the budget.

The justification offered was that it involved only a few individuals – most notably outgoing Camden Mayor Dana Redd – but the optics and the context are damning. Critics were quick to point out that Redd is closely allied with both Sweeney and South Jersey Democratic powerbroker George Norcross and they cooked up the plan at the last minute to make her retirement a bit more comfortable.

While insisting the number of people who would benefit would have no significant impact on the pension system, Sweeney's inability to even estimate how many it covered or what its ultimate cost would be suggested that once again, in using the pension system as a political tool, private interest had triumphed over public policy.

The haste with which it has been done in the hope it would go largely unnoticed in the hectic waning days of the session smacks of favored treatment for the politically-connected, while the not so connected face a possible scaling back of their benefits.

That it involves but a few individuals is a fair point, but it undermines the credibility of those who've argued for years that the system needs serious revisions if it is to survive and fulfill the promise to retirees and current employees who pay faithfully into it.

Sweeney and supporters of the legislation argued further that it was a corrective action to remedy the provisions of a 2007 law which forced certain elected officials to leave the system and enroll in a different one.



Steve Sweeney (Photo: File photo)

Why it took 10 years to discover this purported unfairness went embarrassingly unanswered.

Christie and Sweeney teamed up also to move some 80 nominations and appointments through the Senate, ranging from judgeships to advisory boards and commissions.

While filling these vacancies presumably could have occurred at any point, taking the action at the 11th hour effectively denies governor-elect Phil Murphy the opportunity to offer the positions to his supporters.



Gov. Chris Christie speaks at a press conference in Trenton this month to announce his pension commission's final report. (Photo: Amy Newman/NorthJersey.com)

Not surprisingly, the political cognoscenti who thrive in New Jersey's superheated political atmosphere was quick to promote the idea that the Christie/Sweeney tag team was a clear case of muscle-flexing by South Jersey Democrats (read, Norcross) – a reminder to Murphy that hardball is a game two can play.

The relationship between Murphy and Sweeney is a decidedly cool one, attributable in considerable measure to the Senate president's feeling that Murphy could have and should have done more to dissuade the New Jersey Education Association from launching a \$5 million campaign to unseat him.

Sweeney is a force to be reckoned with and there exists concern that the governor-elect doesn't fully appreciate that reality. Murphy comes to the highest political office in the state largely unschooled in the intrigue, deal-making, favor-swapping and throat-cutting that often defines the legislative process.



Governor-elect Phil Murphy speaks to Northjersey.com's Charles Stile and Dustin Racioppi in Newark, NJ on Monday, December 11, 2017. (Photo: Danielle Parhizkaran/Northjersey.com)

While Sweeney not only understands that environment, but is masterful at dealing with it. The key to achieving Murphy's ambitious agenda – higher taxes, greater spending, more social programs – is in Sweeney's hands, a reality Murphy must come to recognize early on.

He need look no further than Sweeney's role in partnering with Christie to push 80 nominations and appointments through the Senate in a matter of days to fully grasp the power at the disposal of the Senate president.

The lame duck frenzy of activity was exacerbated with the revelations that 10 former Christie administration staffers or those closely allied with him had received appointments and promotions – many to jobs with salaries well into six figures – at New Jersey Transit.

NJ Transit is an agency inching ever closer to dysfunction, beset by service disruptions and delays and a loss of experienced train operators and personnel. It is well behind schedule in installing state of the art safety mechanisms and has dipped heavily into its capital improvement budget to meet operating expenses, a serious breach of established fiscal practice.



Gov. Chris Christie, surrounded by Democratic legislators, signs criminal justice bills into law on Wednesday, Dec. 20, 2017. (Photo: Dustin Racioppi/northjersey.com)

And it's also \$120 million in hock to Amtrak and no readily available way to pay it. In light of these difficulties, appearing to use it as a soft landing for administration friends brought accusations that the governor had turned it into a patronage pit at the expense of the smooth functioning of a crucial agency.

Although the appointments to NJT occurred over the past few years rather than during the lame duck period, their disclosure at this point handed one more argument to those critical of a political system which too often places personal considerations ahead of public welfare.

The session is nearing its end and, as attention turns to the beginning of the Murphy era of governing, what transpired in the past few weeks will grow dim and fade from public consciousness.

A cynic once observed that "Lame duck sessions are where good ideas go to die and bad ideas go to become law."

This year's session did nothing to disabuse anyone of that notion. The gift giving season is alive and well.

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