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## COLUMNIST

# Untangling the Appearance of a Sweeney-Coughlin Rift

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When Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin (D-Middlesex) unveiled his proposal to reform the public school teachers' health benefits package (<https://www.insidernj.com/bill-drops-coughlin-cross-currents-njea-endorsements/>) and substantially reduce employee contributions, the media and the Trenton in-crowd quickly pounced, characterizing it as evidence of a significant break with Senate President Steve Sweeney (D-Gloucester), over a policy issue that has dominated and bedeviled legislatures and administrations.

Like most knee-jerk reactions, it is accurate only in a narrow sense but overlooks the larger forces at play. Certainly, Coughlin's legislation — a long sought goal of the New Jersey Education Association — is markedly different and falls considerably short of the comprehensive overhaul of the public pension system championed by Sweeney.

It does not, though, rise to the level of a philosophical rift between the two leaders nor does it by any means represent a fissure in what has been a united front which has served both men well in re-asserting legislative dominance and placing it on an equal footing with the executive branch in determining public policy.

Rather, the Speaker's idea reflects the most fundamental rule of political life — in an election year, provide the greatest degree of protection possible to your colleagues and head off or mitigate opposition from outside sources, particularly those with financial and organizational clout.

Sweeney conceded as much when, in his response, he said: "It's frustrating but elections sometimes make you make some decisions that might not be as good as they need to be."

It was a not very subtle acknowledgement that election year considerations was the impetus behind Coughlin's legislation and Sweeney — seasoned pol that he is and wise in the ways of election pressures — fully understood the dynamics.

To no one's surprise, the Speaker's proposal was quickly endorsed by Gov. Phil Murphy who has stalwartly stood by public employee unions in opposition to changes in the benefits package which require increased employee costs.

Coughlin, naturally, is seeking to preserve and possibly build upon the 54-26 majority Democrats currently enjoy, and, not coincidentally, win re-election as Speaker by acclamation.

A leader who charts a winning course and is instrumental in providing the financial and policy resources to succeed not only earns the gratitude of his members but amasses chits — the coin of the political realm — which can be redeemed for support in times of controversy or when a difficult vote is needed.

Continued Democratic control of the Assembly is a given, but increasing their numbers would be a significant accomplishment with Coughlin at the center. For Republicans, holding the seats they already occupy while adding 15 more to reach a majority would constitute an upset of epic earthquake proportions.

The NJEA remains a force in legislative contests and its power is magnified in an election in which Assembly candidates lead the ticket and turnout is expected to fall in the 20 per cent range. With a slender margin of error and no coattails dangling from above, a shift of a few thousand votes — something the NJEA is capable of delivering — can quickly turn incumbency into a return to private life.

The NJEA has already endorsed a majority of Democratic incumbents and challengers and Coughlin, by positioning his members firmly in support of the Association's most treasured goal, has provided an added layer of electoral protection at no cost to him or his party.

Sweeney has made it clear that the Speaker's legislation is dead on arrival in the Senate, but that matters little; the Senate does not stand for re-election until 2021 and his opposition will have no influence this November.

Consequently, there is no appreciable downside for Democratic Assembly candidates to openly oppose the Democratic leader of the Senate while endearing themselves to a major player in the election, one that possesses a healthy campaign balance sheet and has demonstrated its willingness to use it.

Ever since the pension reforms and increased contributions were signed by former Gov. Chris Christie in his first term, the NJEA has been relentless in its pursuit of reversing the cost to its members, ever mindful of the supportive role Sweeney played in securing legislative approval of the reform package.

The most significant thing about the relationship between Sweeney and the NJEA is that there isn't one —they loathe each other. The Senator's role in the pension reforms enacted under Christie so enraged the NJEA that its leaders lost all perspective and judgment, launching and funding a hapless Republican candidate to oppose Sweeney in 2017, and put \$5 million into the campaign only to suffer a humiliating embarrassment when the Senator won by 18 points.

The well was forever poisoned and whatever slim hope existed that the two sides might make peace vanished, buried by an avalanche of personal attacks.

There is a great deal at stake for the NJEA in the debate over revising the pension and benefits system and the eventual outcome.

The Christie era reforms required an employee contribution of between three and 35 percent of the cost of premiums, depending on the level of coverage selected, while Coughlin's legislation would establish a contribution level of between two and eight percent of salary. The potential for a significant reduction in teachers' costs is enormous, indeed.

By proposing a dramatic reduction in the contribution percentage and shifting it from premiums to salary, Coughlin has, in effect, invited serious negotiation and compromise. He recognizes that a final legislative product — should there be one — will not include all the elements of his legislation in their current iteration while Sweeney may bend somewhat in his demands in the higher interest of resolving an issue which, if allowed to linger in a stalemate, has serious and damaging consequences for the state's fiscal condition.

By going all in on the Coughlin legislation, the NJEA hopes to increase the pressure on Sweeney and the Senate, embracing one of the most enduring principles of realpolitik: "The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

It's unlikely that Coughlin will be able to broker a truce between Sweeney and the NJEA, but if his strategy pays off, he'll come out from under the Senate President's shadow and establish himself as a major player, enhance his stature and strengthen his leadership position.

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