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COLUMNIST

Murphy V. Sweeney: The Personal and Political Divide Appears Unbridgeable

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By Carl Golden

In directing his cabinet to prepare to close their offices should a state budget not be in place on July 1, Gov. Phil Murphy has started along a path whose outcome — while unclear at the moment — could inflict lasting political damage and weaken his Administration for the remainder of his term.

His threat of a shutdown with employee furloughs, closing state parks and beaches at the beginning of the vacation season, and denying essential services to taxpayers was both a direct challenge and a smack in the chops to Senate President Steve Sweeney (D-Gloucester) and Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin (D-Middlesex).

Sweeney earlier made a similar shutdown threat by delaying legislative action on the fiscal 2019 budget unless the spending plan includes revising the formula for state aid to local school districts to remove what he insists is the unfair allocation of money.

While both can carry out their threats, the crucial difference between the two is the message each attempts to convey.

Government shutdowns are fundamentally a public relations war, driven by a strategy to establish noble motives for oneself while characterizing the opponent as possessing baser political motives and producing disruption and chaos to pursue them.

Murphy is willing to bring government to a standstill over the Legislature's refusal to accept his \$1.7 billion tax increase package while Sweeney — a critic of the proposed increases — is demanding the Legislature right an egregious wrong by adopting an equitable aid formula to eliminate years of shortchanging districts which have experienced growing enrollments but denied proportionate funding.

The frame of reference for the debate will be simple: Murphy wants to raise taxes; Sweeney wants equal treatment for school districts.

For legislators with an eye on next year's midterm elections, the choice is obvious, even if it means breaking with a governor of their own party. It may be the path of least resistance, but in legislative history it is a path well-trod.

Coming shortly after news accounts of a contentious meeting between legislative and administration staffers, Murphy's shutdown threat appears to have been issued in haste and without due consideration of the long-term consequences.

Decisions reached in the heat of battle, in a fit of pique or to prove a point are never wise.

Sweeney and Coughlin have been outspoken for months — presumably with the support of their members — in opposition to the governor's plan to increase the income tax rate on those earning \$1 million or more and to restore the seven percent sales tax while extending it to a variety of consumer services.

The governor and the Senate President have been taking increasingly harsh potshots at one another, opening a personal and political divide which appears unbridgeable.

There is considerable history of animosity between them, dating back to last November's election when Sweeney was attacked relentlessly by the New Jersey Education Association, one of Murphy's strongest supporters. Sweeney is still smarting over the governor's refusal to intervene and direct the Association to temper its assault. The NJEA's campaign and Murphy's silence in the face of it will go down as one of the greatest political blinders in modern New Jersey history.

More recently, when news broke that New Directions New Jersey, a non-profit organization associated with Murphy planned a television advertising campaign touting the governor's programs and accomplishments, Sweeney and Coughlin immediately interpreted it as an attempt to exert pressure on them and the Legislature to buy into the governor's budget proposal.

Their warning of a serious backlash was disregarded and the ad campaign moved ahead. In a belated effort to respond, the organization released the content of the ad which turned out to be rather benign, including standard Democratic fare such as equal pay, paid family leave, tighter gun control measures, automatic voter registration, etc. Low hanging fruit all.

It was not the ad message that mattered, but that it went forward over the objections of the two leaders. It was a stunning "in your face" act on the part of an administration whose legislative agenda is already in shambles and whose rescue depends entirely on Sweeney and Coughlin. A public rebuke of such

magnitude is not easily forgiven nor forgotten.

Murphy enters the public relations war over a potential shutdown with few allies. It's likely that public sympathy will lean more toward Sweeney's insistence on a more equitable school aid distribution formula than on Murphy's demand for higher taxes and greater spending.

If the Legislature approves and sends to him a budget without the tax increases he wants, Murphy is between the hammer and the anvil. If he orders a government shutdown, the blame will surely fall more heavily on him than on the Legislature. If, on the other hand, he accepts the budget, it will immediately be portrayed as a retreat and a victory for Sweeney, inevitably weakening the Administration's hand in future confrontations with the Legislature.

It will also be viewed as a mockery of the notion that a unified government with Democrats in control of the executive and legislative branches will produce a more responsive, solution-oriented body.

Normally, it would seem to be a stalemate ripe for compromise, for each side to give — grudgingly or not — in the higher interest of a smoothly functioning government.

Both sides, though, are so locked into their respective positions and so much poison has already been dumped into the well that a meeting of the minds is a dim hope rather than a clear possibility.

The embarrassment to all concerned of a government shutdown may yet force some sort of resolution, albeit one that no one will be pleased with and no one can claim victory.

In his campaign, Murphy who was fond of using the tagline "I'll have your back" as he made promise after promise to interest groups. Six months into his governorship, he's reached a point at which he could use that kind of encouragement.

Carl Golden is a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.

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