

## Guest Opinion: Letter jumps the gun on investigative committee

By Carl Golden

Posted Nov 4, 2018 at 5:48 AM

The select legislative committee to investigate the hiring practices and procedures of the Murphy administration convened an organizational session last week, but an effort has already begun to undermine its credibility by intimating that the entire exercise is designed to highlight and exploit political differences between the governor and legislative leadership rather than develop recommendations to better support victims of sexual assaults.

A letter signed by 30 women who have supported Gov. Phil Murphy expressed their concern that “political machinations” would hinder the committee’s inquiry. They referred specifically to the differences between Murphy and Senate President Steven Sweeney, D-3rd of West Deptford, on policy and budgetary issues.

Analia Mejia, director of New Jersey Working Families, put it more bluntly: “It’s a political body and more likely to veer into politics.”

Mejia said the committee could be used to attack Murphy, adding: “We have watched how the relationship between the Senate president and the governor has undermined what should have been a collaboration on progressive issues.”

There could be no mistaking that the letter was a direct shot at Sweeney, who moved quickly to establish the legislative investigation following the revelation that Albert Alvarez, chief of staff to the Schools Development Authority, had been appointed to the \$140,000 position despite allegations that in 2017 he sexually assaulted a campaign co-worker, who is now also a member of the administration. Alvarez quietly resigned his position shortly before his accuser’s story became public.

While the signers of the letter insisted their only motive was to protect victims of sexual assaults from becoming figures for “public consumption,” the tone and rhetoric were construed as constructing a firewall around Murphy to guard against any suggestion that the administration’s hiring practices involved favoritism based on political or large donor considerations.

Alvarez’s accuser, Kate Brennan, chief of staff at the Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency, has already indicated her willingness to appear before the committee to recount her experience in attempting to bring her story to the appropriate individuals in the Governor’s Office.

That she has displayed great courage in stepping forward is undeniable, and there is no reason to believe the committee will use her for “public consumption” or to cast doubt on her truthfulness.

It is, moreover, a major stretch to suggest that Sen. Loretta Weinberg, D-3th of Teaneck, the select committee co-chairwoman, would stand for political posturing or allow the panel to stray from its mandate and become an instrument of political retaliation.

Weinberg is a tough and tested legislator, whose record on women’s rights issues is solid. She will brook no nonsense as the committee proceeds with public hearings and its deliberations.

Also, Weinberg has traveled this road before, serving as co-chair of the Legislature's select committee on investigations that probed the Bridgegate scandal, which proved so damaging to Gov. Chris Christie and his administration.

The concern expressed in the letter that sexual assault victims be treated as victims of horrendous crimes and not be held up to public ridicule is a genuine one and shared by an overwhelming majority of people.

The signers, however, damage their own argument by suggesting that the committee is more intent on scoring political points than in developing credible proposals to enhance the ability to respond to assault allegations and protect the victims.

Given the intensity and breadth of the news coverage of the accusations against Alvarez, any political damage suffered by the governor has already been inflicted.

Murphy has blamed the transition officials for approving Alvarez's appointment despite the accusations, and has retained outside counsel to review hiring practices and procedures and to determine steps to prevent any future recurrences.

There is no doubt that there will exist political overtones in the legislative committee's task. It is inevitable, given that appointments at the highest levels of government nearly always involve some degree of political considerations.

The letter signed by the 30 women is either an overreach or a conscious effort to cast doubt on the integrity of the committee investigation before it even begins.

What had up to this point been viewed as a reasonable and responsible legislative response to a deeply serious issue has not gotten off to an auspicious start.

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