

OPINION: WILL MURPHY AND LEGISLATIVE LEADERS FIND WAYS TO AGREE IN 2019?

CARL GOLDEN | JANUARY 3, 2019

The holidays brought a lull in the pointed rhetoric between the governor and Democratic leadership. But the terrain ahead could be treacherous



Carl Golden

Legend has it that on Christmas Eve 1914 on a battlefield in France, soldiers in the British Expeditionary Force and German infantry laid down their arms, met in no man's land to exchange holiday greetings and join in singing carols extolling peace on earth, goodwill toward men before returning to their trenches and resume firing at one another.

Apocryphal or not, the moral of that 100-year-old tale applies in somewhat less lethal fashion to the deteriorating state of affairs that has sharply divided the administration of Gov. Phil Murphy

and the Democratic legislative leadership.

The holiday break produced a lull in the increasingly confrontational standoff and pointed rhetoric between the two sides.

Murphy and his family jetted off on a sightseeing safari in Tanzania while Senate President Steve Sweeney (D-Gloucester) and Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin (D-Middlesex) stuck closer to home to raise a glass, toast the year's end and turn attention to the legislative election year of 2019.

By any measure, 2018 was a less than stellar year for Murphy. Two of his major agenda items – legalization of marijuana possession and an increase in the minimum wage to \$15 per hour – went unfulfilled and appear on the verge of stalemate while a third – a tax increase on wealthy New Jerseyans – achieved very limited success.

The administration came perilously close to a government shutdown over his proposed budget before he conceded on a number of his recommendations and accepted what was largely a legislatively-drawn spending plan.

One row after another

As the legislative session drew to a close, a major uproar erupted over a proposed constitutional amendment to dramatically change the method by which legislative districts are drawn and Sweeney was forced to back off the idea. There is, though, every indication he hasn't abandoned the idea entirely and intends to try again this year.

That row was quickly followed by an unprecedented power play move to depose Democratic State Chairman John Currie, a close confidant and ally of the governor, and replace him with Essex County Chairman Leroy Jones even though Currie has a year remaining in his term.

While these political disruptions heightened the increasing animosity between the administration and legislative leaders, they were overshadowed by allegations of sexual assault against a Murphy campaign official who was later appointed to a \$140,000 position in the administration and eventually forced to resign when the accusations became public.

A legislative investigating committee was quickly formed, and its initial hearings portrayed high level administration officials, aware of the assault, acting tentatively and unsure of how to proceed, other than to keep the governor in the dark.

The testimony before the committee reflected poorly on the behavior and response of the governor's staff, reinforcing the perception that their inexperience, indecisiveness and political naivete created a major and embarrassing controversy needlessly.

Budget brinksmanship

Murphy surely breathed a sigh of relief as 2018 passed into history, but the prospects for a milder and more conciliatory 2019 appear unlikely, indeed.

The investigating committee hasn't concluded its work, for instance, and additional hearings with administration officials called to testify will certainly produce intense media coverage potentially unfavorable to the administration.

Beyond that, the governor's recent indication that he would renew his call for tax increases when he submits his 2019-2020 fiscal budget to the Legislature drew an immediate negative response from Sweeney and Coughlin, teeing up **another round of budget brinksmanship** and threat of a government shutdown.

There will likely be enough lines drawn in the sand that the Army Corps of Engineers may be called upon for a beach replenishment program in the halls of the State House.

Murphy is deeply committed to the millionaire's tax and to restoring the sales tax to 7 percent while the presiding legislative officers are equally adamant in their opposition.

Shouts and slammed doors

Sweeney in particular has steadfastly insisted on spending reductions over tax increases, adopting the "government doesn't have a revenue problem, it has a spending problem" mantra.

In reiterating his anti-tax posture, Sweeney couldn't resist mocking the governor by employing the phrase "Period. Full stop" to emphasize his point. It may have been a minor poke at the governor whose fondness for the quip is well-known, but it was also a subtle reminder that last year's budget negotiation, complete with shouts and slamming doors, was but a relatively calm prelude to what could develop this year.

As for breaking the stalemate over marijuana legalization and a minimum wage increase, both sides have expressed optimism that general agreement has been reached on both issues and that the remaining points of difference can be resolved through compromises.

The mere fact, though, that both issues have dragged on for a year missing repeated deadlines for action suggests strongly that considerable difficulty remains.

The two sides are fairly far apart on many of the details and any compromise will demand that each swallow hard and give considerable ground. There is no question that Murphy needs high-profile victories desperately and holds a weaker hand in negotiating successful outcomes.

Election matters

Democratic Assembly members are acutely aware they will lead the ballot this November and that traditionally elections like it draw relatively low turnouts. They will want a record of accomplishment to campaign on and it's not likely they will look favorably on tax increases proposed by their party's governor, yet another factor Murphy must deal with as the session unfolds.

A century ago, the Brits and the Hun put aside their enmity in the interest of a higher purpose, meeting on contested ground for a brief truce before returning to battle.

The ground is still there. Whether Murphy, Sweeney and Coughlin will emulate them, share occupancy and a brief truce remains to be seen.

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