



EDWARD EDWARDS

Progressives' Pushback May Benefit Murphy

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In assessing the level of success achieved by a governor's eight years in office, it's been said: "The first term is all about winning re-election; the second term is all about crafting a legacy."

There is, like most shorthand versions of larger and more complicated issues, sufficient truth in the observation for it to be credible while leaving enough space for more in-depth debate of the 96 months' worth of a governor's life.

Gov. Phil Murphy fulfilled the first part — he won re-election in 2021 — and as he enters his sixth year as chief executive, the second half — legacy building — lies ahead. Hence, the parsing of his State of the State message earlier this month in search of clues to the path he's charted toward a significant chapter in the state's history.

The state's self-styled progressive wing — normally a reliable ally — is unhappy, though, over what they perceive to be a calculated shift toward the dreaded "m" word — moderate.

Activist groups across the progressive spectrum were upset and disappointed over Murphy's failure to mention — or mentioned only briefly — issues such as the environment, voting rights, climate change, and wealth inequality.

They reserved their harshest criticism, though, for Murphy's intention to allow the surcharge on the state's corporate business tax to expire at the end of this year, with one calling it "a billion dollar tax cut for the most profitable businesses in the state."

The left-wing New Jersey Policy Perspective ripped into the proposal, assailing it as the "worst of trickle-down economics," that would "allow corporations like Amazon and Walmart to make billions off the backs of low paid workers."

Murphy, who once bragged he wanted to make New Jersey "the California of the east," drove the progressive agenda during his first term, securing victories on issues such as marriage equality, enhanced firearms controls, stronger protections for access to abortion services, legalization of marijuana, higher minimum wage and enactment of a millionaire's tax.

The pushback from New Jersey's progressives may in fact benefit Murphy's long range plans by drawing greater attention to his more moderate yearnings — newly found as they may be — as recognizing the long unassailable political truism that holds that the majority of the nation occupies the center and will respond to a candidate who shares that territory and outlook and will govern from there while rejecting the more extreme far left agenda.

He won't be California Gov. Gavin Newsom but he certainly won't be Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, either. He may have come to it late, but Murphy has demonstrated he can "read the room" and react accordingly.

In a deeply revealing comment, Murphy said "I'm not a progressive for the sake of it. I'm a pragmatic progressive." For many on the hard left, such sentiments are heresy.

He's seemingly concluded that pressures and criticisms from the progressive left can be absorbed without meaningful longer-term impact, particularly in light of his first term successes in fulfilling major components of their agenda.

Jolted by a surprisingly slim three-point re-election margin in 2021 along with the loss of seven seats in the Legislature, Murphy faces the 2023 election cycle in which all 120 seats will be on the ballot in newly-drawn districts.

Murphy's tilt toward the center may be reflective of concern among the Democratic majorities that voters perceive a movement gone too far to the left — particularly nationally as evidenced by President Biden's falling approval ratings and the narrow loss of control of the House of Representatives — and desire a less ideologically-driven agenda.

Others view the governor's approach with a dose of cynicism as a strategy propelled in part by his interest in heightening his national profile ahead of the 2024 presidential scramble.

His name crops up periodically in speculation commentaries although he — like others in similar circumstances — will remain in a holding pattern awaiting Biden's decision concerning his own future.

His decision, for instance, to allow the corporate tax surcharge to expire is not an indication that the scales have suddenly fallen from his eyes and he's recognized the value of investment and growth.

Rather, his acceptance of one of the business community's most sought after actions is an understanding that economic growth and job creation are vital components in building a reputation as someone willing to temper ideological leanings in the larger interest and benefit of his constituents.

Progressives have historically viewed big business as motivated by greed and shareholder rewards to the detriment of workers while the moderates' approach, while agreeing that business should pay its fair share in taxes, has been to cease utilizing it as a cash cow to finance new, expanded and costly social programs.

When Murphy submits his proposed fiscal 2024 budget to the Legislature in a few weeks, it will bring depth and clarity to his centrist shift.

Progressives will be on high alert, scrutinizing the governor's spending priorities and poised to pounce if they fall short of their expectations.

For his part, Murphy understands that maintaining control of the Legislature and building on their majorities will validate his decision to step back from the far left, a step toward building a legacy and, not coincidentally, a step closer to 2024.

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