



The Inquirer Digital

Karen Heller: Quietly or loudly, governors make bad moves



By Karen Heller, Inquirer Columnist



TOM GRALISH / Staff Photographer

With Gov. Corbett, Pennsylvania faces the sounds of gubernatorial silence - unlike in Gov. Christie's New Jersey.

Posted on Sun, Mar. 6, 2011

Our region boasts one governor who vents entirely too much, and another who is so quiet, so circumspect on specifics, that his office is being compared to North Korea.

Governor Blowhard of New Jersey is voluble, bombastic, emotional, and unedited. He sounds like a Fox News commentator, while also being mentioned as a possible Republican presidential nominee, which often amounts to the same thing.

When Chris Christie was his state's U.S. attorney, he won convictions against more than 100 elected officials and public workers. Now that he's governor, he has bigger fish to fry, pursuing the nastiest, vilest, most overcompensated form of humanity. Bankers? Mobsters? No, teachers. "I don't understand why it is that I care more about those kids than they do," he said last week, attacking the teachers union, "but it's obvious that I do, because they don't want to change the system."

How Christie managed to gain traction attacking the very talent that draws so many residents to the state remains dumbfounding. New Jersey teachers are among the nation's best paid, averaging \$66,600 annually, but many of its schools are among the best, too, befitting a state with a high median income and enviable graduation and literacy rates.

Part of the state's richness comes from having great schools. I don't know anyone who moved to New Jersey who *didn't* do so to take advantage of the schools. Furthermore, Christie's bullying assault on teachers - no, he would argue, their union - is harsh on women, given that three-quarters of teachers are female.

Now, I happen to believe that teachers could contribute more of their income toward health care. Many of us already pay plenty. I just don't think you have to go to war to get there.

But that's not the dialogue we're having these days.

Well, with Pennsylvania's silent Tom Corbett, we're not having *any* dialogue.

While Corbett and Wisconsin's Scott Walker broadcast their intentions - indeed, Christie is a verbal pugilist incapable of keeping quiet - Pennsylvanians are greeted with the sounds of silence. It seems unfair that Governor Garbo has offered no suggestion as to what he plans to whack Tuesday when he announces his budget with \$4 billion in spending cuts, except that it will hurt. As his budget secretary, Charles Zogby, says, "The day of reckoning has arrived."

Already, the commonwealth has made a devastating choice. Last week, adultBasic died for lack of support by the governor and legislature. AdultBasic was the bare-bones health-insurance safety net for Pennsylvanians, who paid as little as \$36 a month. It cost the state a pittance to run. Launched in 2001 by Republican Govs. Tom Ridge and Mark Schweiker, the program long enjoyed bipartisan support, because it was funded by a mammoth tobacco settlement and the state's healthy four Blue Cross Blue Shield insurance groups. The plan assisted people who weren't poor enough for Medicaid and not old enough for Medicare.

AdultBasic covered 40,764 Pennsylvanians, almost two-thirds of them women, but the plan's true value was reflected in the enormous waiting list of residents craving coverage: more than half a million. That's one in every 24 state residents.

Last spring, when he was attorney general, Corbett joined the multistate suit against health-care reform while he was also running for governor (a common thread among the other attorneys general), going so far as to mail potential donors a fund-raising letter decrying "the health-care monstrosity." This would be the same attorney general who built his reputation indicting legislators who used their offices for political purposes.

In the wake of adultBasic's death, the Corbett administration suggested Pennsylvanians sign up with the Blues' Special Care policy, which costs \$148 a month, four times as much as the killed program, while being less extensive, limiting subscribers to four doctor's visits a year. That's some plan: impossibly expensive *and* worse coverage.

Since fewer employers offer comprehensive health coverage, Pennsylvania runs the risk of having more uninsured residents, a cost that is passed on through overtaxed health systems, social services, and government entities, all of which face imminent budget cuts of their own.

Poor residents don't simply disappear into the ether because they lack coverage. They get sicker. And poor health is something we all pay for, just as poor schools become an untenable cost because they create an unprepared, underemployed, and uninsured workforce.

Fortunately, Auditor General Jack Wagner is trying to save the program.

"This program is a line in the sand, whether or not the state government truly cares about the health of its people," Wagner tells me. "AdultBasic is truly a preventive program, helping with screening for someone with a severe health problem - breast cancer or colon cancer - so that they are not devastated physically and fiscally."

I realize that legislators are charged with making hard, unenviable choices. We all have to make sacrifices, with many more to come. But the lack of compassion and humanity in this process - attacking teachers; allowing basic, inexpensive health coverage to expire - is beyond troubling.

And this is only the beginning.

From NJEA ... Educators take the hit ...

Christie budget targets school employees

Published on Tuesday, February 22, 2011

NJEA President Barbara Keshishian issued the following statement in response to Governor Chris Christie's budget address:

"In this budget, the governor continues to scapegoat public education employees by pitting senior citizens and all of New Jersey against them.

"He may claim there are no new taxes in his budget, but don't tell that to New Jersey's teachers and school employees, who would take a huge hit under his proposals.

"He promises to make a legally required \$500 million contribution to the pension system, but only if teachers and school employees pay thousands more out of their salaries – on top of their current contributions.

"He promises to provide property tax relief to senior citizens, but only if teachers and school employees pay thousands more in higher health care premiums – on top of what they already pay.

"Educators have already shown they're willing to share in the sacrifice, but Chris Christie is singling them out to pay the entire tab for this budget.

"We estimate that his proposals would cut the average teacher's compensation by 15 percent or more. Where is the shared sacrifice?"

From Reuters

State, local govt workers not overpaid in US-study

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - State and local government workers are compensated 3.75 percent less than workers in the private sector, according to a study released on Wednesday.

The research group Economic Policy Institute compared workers completing similar tasks in both sectors and found that state government employees are compensated 7.55 percent less than their private counterparts, while local government employees earn 1.84 percent less.

"Several governors have identified excessive public employee compensation as a major cause of their states' fiscal duress," the study said, noting that states have been forced to cut spending as a result of the recession that began in 2007.

"The data analysis in this paper, however, indicates that public employees, both state and local government, are not overpaid," it said.

The report comes at a time of growing public outrage over what is perceived as overly generous pay, benefits and pensions awarded to public sector workers. A scandal that erupted in July over reports that Bell, a city of 37,000 in Los Angeles County, California, had been paying its city manager \$787,637 a year, or nearly twice U.S. President Barack Obama's salary, helped fuel the flames and led to a state probe that is expected to result in new rules for local governments. For more, see [ID:nN04237542].

Private sector workers, who have seen their 401K retirement accounts suffer heavy losses in the crisis, have become increasingly vocal in their criticism of benefits they believe they fund through taxes.

But the EPI found that the benefits public employees receive "do not offset the lower wages they are paid."

The difference between compensation levels grows with educational attainment, EPI said, because the public sector sets a floor on compensation. That means the entry level worker with only a high school diploma earns more in the public sector than in the private sector. But doctors, lawyers and professionals working for governments earn significantly less.

State and local governments pay college-educated workers on average 25 percent less than private employers.

In April, a report commissioned by the Center for State and Local Government Excellence and the National Institute on Retirement Security found that employees in state and local sectors are twice as likely as their private sector counterparts to have a college or advanced degree.

But that study, conducted by economists Keith Bender and John Heywood from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, found that state employees have total compensation that is 6.8 percent lower than comparable workers in the private sector and local employees' compensation is 7.4 percent lower.

The EPI study did not address the role contractors play in state and local government functions. (Reporting by Lisa Lambert; Editing by James Dagleish)

© Copyright Thomson Reuters 2011 All rights reserved. Users may download and print extracts of content from this website for their own personal and non-commercial use only.
