Latinate phraseology will be in high vogue in Pennsylvania if Bill DeWeese becomes the next speaker of the state House. The Keystone state’s own walking, talking cornucopia of circumlocution is likely to bring to Harrisburg a certain elevated style of language not seen publicly since the sesquipedalian William F Buckley held forth on public television.

To get things properly started into the Deweesian era, we offer a nifty Latin phrase that sums up the passing year--annus mirabilis-- which roughly translated means miraculous year, or a year in which some pretty spectacular things happened. By any measure 2006 was one heck of an annus mirabilis.

Need some reminders?

- In 2006 (OK, technically 2005, but it was late 2005), Pennsylvania voters un-elected a Supreme Court Justice in a retention election, the first time voters had ever done that. That event sent shock waves through the political system which today still reverberate: The specter of the electorate actually paying some attention to the shenanigans in Harrisburg stunned a generation of politicos who had been schooled to believe that such presuming voter behavior simply didn’t happen in a nice place like Pennsylvania.

- In 2006, Ed (one term) Rendell was reelected with one of the largest pluralities in recent PA history—after beating Lynn (can’t miss because he is a celebrity) Swann. Old conventional wisdom: Big City Mayors like Rendell can’t win; new conventional wisdom: Big City Mayors like Rendell can’t lose.

- In 2006, Rick (I am practically President already) Santorum lost his US Senate seat by one of the most lopsided counts in the past quarter century of US history. But he did it with style. Most losing candidates are satisfied simply to lose and be done with it, but not Santorum. He had to write the definitive book on it. What other candidate, in memory, has come up with so many different ways to alienate and distress the voters. It will be decades, if ever, before another incumbent comes up with so many innovative ways to unburden themselves from high office.

- In 2006, four incumbent members of Congress lost their seats (and a fifth barely won), the first time that many incumbents had lost in more than 30 years. The congressional delegation in the state went from almost 2:1 Republican (12 Republicans, 7 Democrats) to about 60 percent Democratic (11 Democrat, 8 Republican), producing a political tsunami that has turned partisan politics virtually upside down. The last time so many congressional incumbents sweated this much. Noah was just a small boy playing with toy boats.

- In 2006, altogether 56 state legislative incumbents saddled up their (tax payer subsidized) horses for the last time, making room for 56 freshman members, the largest freshman class in modern history. Democrats were the largest beneficiaries of the voters’ wrath (They gained control of the state House for the time since 1995)—not necessarily because they were more esteemed than Republicans, but because they were the only alternative.
So, politically, the year 2006 will be recorded as one of the most memorable in state history--change came to Pennsylvania and not a little drama with it, and the change wasn’t always pretty, but it was always interesting, an *annus mirabilis* in *any* language.

But what does 2007 portend? Could budding change become a perennial in state politics? Have we turned a corner, undergone a conversion, or changed our spots. Are we ready for what the pols like to term "fundamental reform?"

Maybe!

But Pennsylvania’s political history counsels caution.

For eons Pennsylvania has been a state where the pace of change was glacial, where reform was not a word used in polite company, and where change usually meant exchanging the tired unimaginative and failed policies of one reviled political party for the tired, unimaginative, failed policies of the other reviled political party.

True, the July 2005 pay hike produced genuine voter anger and spawned statewide reform groups with clear goals and a specific agenda, including:

- A smaller legislature
- Term limits
- An end to partisan redistricting
- A constitutional convention
- Legislative reform

And the advocates of reform seem omnipresent. Everyone is a reformer now, from the newly elected legislative challengers, to battle-scarred incumbents, and even to Governor Rendell.

But the reality of reform has not yet matched the rhetoric of reform. State politicians have learned how to talk the talk, but there is still only meager evidence that they are ready also to walk the walk. Indeed, it has been some 18 months since the pay hike, and the only reform measure adopted has been lobbying registration and regulation--not trivial to be sure, but not earth shaking either.

At bottom, reform means changing the way things are done in Harrisburg, returning accountability to the electorate, restoring integrity to the political process, and making a better state for all Pennsylvanians to live and work.

One or even several elections will not achieve these objectives nor will a couple of off-the-rack reforms fashioned more to appeal to public opinion than improve public policy. The problems in Pennsylvania are deep rooted and long-standing. The solutions must similarly go deep and prove to be enduring.

The first test of the nascent reform agenda will be whether a newly re-elected governor remembers his promises to the electorate and follows through with a serious and sustained reform program; the second will test the ability of newly resurgent Democrats and reform-minded Republicans to pass a Rendell reform package.
Until both tests pass, we won’t know if reform is real or still only a pipedream in Pennsylvania.

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