Rendell's Dilemma

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Will he or won’t he? It is now Harrisburg’s most persistent political question. Will governor Rendell drop Catherine Baker Knoll, his running mate in 2002 from the ticket when he stands for re-election next year?

The issue of Knoll poses an acute dilemma for Rendell. He really doesn’t want to remove her from the ticket--and he really, really, doesn’t want the hassle that comes with it. Knoll has issued public statements that she will seek reelection and so removing her will be fraught with controversy. He much prefers to avoid the strife, maintain the friendships and avoid the internal political rupture.

In 2002, Rendell endorsed no one, concentrating instead on his tough primary challenge against Bob Casey. By default, the widely known Knoll won the Democratic Lieutenant Governor nomination in a multi-field contest.

Given his druthers, Rendell would do it the same way in 2006. But he can’t. It’s not an option this time. The chances are reasonably high that Rendell’s Lt. Governor in a second term could be asked to lead the state for considerable periods of time. In fact, Pennsylvania’s last two Lt. Governors did so. Now, who would run the state in Rendell’s absence is a matter of some consequence.

Moreover, Knoll has now become an issue. Fairly or unfairly, her performance in office has been widely criticized. She is fair game in a re-election contest, and Rendell’s GOP opponents can be expected to make the most of their opportunity. Running mates rarely help much, but they can hurt a good deal, and Rendell’s re-election chances could be hurt with Knoll on the ticket.

Nor is re-election a sure thing. Rendell’s job performance and favorable ratings are decent, but his support is heavily concentrated in the southeastern part of the state. With Scranton-based Bob Casey poised to run against Senator Rick Santorum, a strong running mate from western Pa would strengthen the Democratic ticket.

Nevertheless, if re-election was the only concern, Rendell might stick with Knoll. He viscerally reaches for low conflict, political decisions and staying with Knoll is the easy way out here. But re-election isn’t his only problem, and maybe it isn’t even his biggest problem.

The Governor may want to run for national office. And why shouldn’t he? As a re-elected governor of a key electoral state, with legendary fund raising abilities, and acknowledged skills as a campaigner, Rendell looks as good as any other Democrat wannabe at this point.

Earlier he lent his chief fundraiser to the Democratic Governors Association and now more recently his communication’s director will head the organization. Rendell is well positioned to seek national office in 2008, should he win reelection as governor in 2006. Or, forgoing that, to join a Democratic administration in 2008 should a Democratic candidate win the presidency.
But to run for national office, Rendell needs an able and trustworthy Lieutenant Governor to hold down the fort while he campaigns, and maybe move into the fort if he goes on a national ticket or wins office.

There is yet another reason Rendell can’t let Knoll stay on the ticket for a second term. He has reason to care who succeeds him as governor. As former big city mayor and National Party chair, Rendell clearly prefers a Democrat successor --and no better way to achieve that aim than to be elected to a second term with a running mate capable of running and winning in his or her own right.

But even more important, Rendell’s legacy as governor might well hinge on who replaces him as governor. Without a strong and decisive Democratic successor, the Republican domination of the legislature virtually assures some dismantlement of Rendell’s polices after he leaves office.

What are the options to replace Knoll with someone who will strengthen the ticket, give Rendell cover if he runs for national office, and provide a possible successor. At least six viable choices exist. Among them:

- Barbara Hafer, the pro-choice former Auditor General and State Treasurer, is tough and seasoned. She won statewide election four times, and electorally would be popular among pro-choice Democratic women.
- Kate McGinty is Rendell’s Environmental Protection Secretary; McGinty is one of the super stars of his administration. A former advisor to Al Gore, McGinty, has federal as well as state experience.
- Dan Onorato is the pro-life elected County Executive from Allegheny Co., who recently showed his political skills by adroitly handling a thorny reassessment problem. He’s considered a rising star in the party.
- Mark Singel, a westerner who has served as Lt Governor, acquitted himself well when he stood in for Bob Casey during the latter’s double organ transplant. A seasoned pro, Singel knows the State Capital well, and is philosophically and politically close to Rendell.
- Dave Sweet was one of Rendell’s top campaign advisors, who often served as a surrogate on the stump during the 2002 campaign. He served in the state House where he earned the reputation as a thoughtful policy oriented legislator.
- Steve Zappala is the current District Attorney of Allegheny County and comes from a political family with deep roots in Western Pa. His grandfather was a Pittsburgh magistrate and his father was Chief Justice of the State Supreme Court. He’s another young Democrat widely perceived as having a future in statewide politics.

In picking a running mate, geography is the critical criterion while gender must be heavily weighed. The candidate has to be from the West and should be a woman. In addition, Rendell is going to look if possible to someone who is electable in his or her own right. And in Pennsylvania, electable usually means “has run before.”

In the end, Rendell may need a women running mate. As a potential national candidate himself for the presidential or vice presidential nomination, the governor doesn’t want to be branded as the guy who dumped the first women Lt. Governor in Pennsylvania history from the ticket--and most particularly he doesn’t want to be known as the guy who dumped a women and replaced her with a man. That’s not going to play well among national Democratic constituencies.
So, replacing Knoll with another women is ideal, but who? Hafer maybe, but that could pick a big fight with Knoll’s wing of the party, and might do little to help with the succession issue. Rendell has no easy choices here. It’s a decision likely to be one of the most consequential he ever makes. How he makes it will tell us much about our governor.