A Cautionary Tale
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Greatness has not touched many modern Pennsylvania governors. One or two have flirted with it--Gifford
Pinchot comes to mind and Bill Scranton had promise. But that elusive quality that defines say a Nelson
Rockefeller in New York or a Woodrow Wilson in New Jersey has been scarce among Keystone chief
executives.

But while greatness has been uncommon, uniqueness has not. Pennsylvania governors have been a hybrid lot.
Running for office they have come from a bevy of personal and professional backgrounds. In office, they have
exhibited a diversity of personalities, styles, and philosophies.

Indeed, it is hard to directly compare any two modern Pennsylvania governors on more than superficial
grounds. The differences between them far exceed the similarities.

This reliable generalization, however, might be tested with the election of Ed Rendell. For the comparisons
between Rendell and former Governor Milton Shapp (1971-1979) seem striking.

Not that anyone would probably ever mistak
Shapp for Rendell. Shapp barely stood five foot eight inches
with his shoes on, and was about as imposing as a gazelle in flight while Rendell fills a room not just because
he's a man of large stature, but also because his personality dominates any venue. Shapp gave new meaning to
the term charisma gap. No one looked less like a chief executive than Shapp or more like one than Rendell.

But beyond these obvious differences of persona, there are some notable similarities between Shapp and
Rendell. They share a common religion, cultural liberalism, and political populism. These are not trivial
commonalities. Rendell is the first elected governor since Shapp to campaign as a cultural liberal or to style
himself as a populist. Neither cultural liberalism nor political populism is commonly associated with
Pennsylvania governors.

But if religion, personal philosophy and political ideology were all they had in common, we might not have
much to talk about. There is, however, much more.

Intellectual style is one of them. Shapp was governor at a time like this one when the state had accumulated
serious problems, suggesting the need for fundamental change. Even so, it was said of Shapp that he had more
ideas and solutions to the problems than there were problems to be solved. In many respects, the same can be
said of governor-elect Ed Rendell. For the past year Rendell has been a torrent of thoughts and policies not
seen since Shapp ran for governor in 1966 and 1970. It is hard to remember any gubernatorial candidate since
Shapp who has raised more issues, proposed more solutions, or made more promises than Rendell.

Shapp and Rendell also share a penchant for cutting edge campaigning. Both ran campaigns that have changed
the nature of politics in the state. As a candidate, Shapp did the impossible. In 1966, he took on the
Democratic machine in the Democratic primary with a campaign that still remains in the textbooks. His use of
television, together with an innovative straight from Hollywood commercial, called 'The Man Against The Machine,' revolutionized state and national politics.

Similarly, Rendell's campaign in 2002 beat the Democratic organization in the primary, and then raised and spent more money than any candidate for any public office in Pennsylvania history. His effective use of advertising, particularly in rebuttal to attack ads by his opponents, has set a new standard for the use of TV in political campaigns, and the effectiveness of his personal campaign style has no modern parallel.

Another striking similarity between Shapp and Rendell is their pro business orientation. In 1970, Shapp was businessman Shapp—who sounded more conservative than the businessmen who voted for him in droves. He hedged on the need to have a state income tax as the state faced a huge budget, though once elected he moved with dispatch to solve the fiscal crisis that saw the legislature enact a state income tax.

Thereafter, Shapp became the entrepreneurial governor, touting the state as a place for industry to locate and appointing Republican's to key positions in his administration.

Rendell, like Shapp, became governor in no small measure because of his successful appeal to the state's Republican business community. In the course of his campaign, Rendell spoke repeatedly to the state's business community, arguing that he would support business tax cuts, use the government to attract new business to the state, create jobs, and be the entrepreneurial governor.

A taste for policy innovation is yet another similarity between Shapp and Rendell. Both are policy innovators. Shapp's boldness in attacking the Harrisburg political and policy establishment has not been replicated. Rendell is less flamboyant in this regard, but he promises to be the biggest innovator since Shapp.

The use of bonds and pension funds illustrate their similar styles. Shapp supported the liberal use of state bonds as well as state pension funds to support public and private goals. Rendell promises to use the state's debt creation apparatus in similarly innovative ways.

Finally, there is the question of their relationship with public unions, customarily for Democratic governors a cozy one. Throughout the campaign Rendell promised to tackle the state's fiscal problems, and bring efficiency to state government. He pledged to find savings in the state budget that will not be popular with public unions, a practice he demonstrated while Philadelphia Mayor when he tamed that city's public bureaucracy.

Shapp, unlike Rendell, did receive the support of the state's public sector unions. But despite his support for the enactment of the state's collective bargaining law, Shapp had to endure contentious relationships with the public unions—including a major public employee strike.

And there are other similarities--perhaps more interesting than significant, but notable, nevertheless. Both are Democrats, of course. Both are from the Philadelphia region (Shapp lived in Montgomery County). Both had to fight entrenched powers in the party to win nomination. Both are married to professional women with well-established careers, and both ran twice before being elected.
It is not known what Governor-elect Rendell may think about the many parallels between himself and former Governor Shapp. Or if he even cares. But undoubtedly there is one thing he doesn't intend to share with Shapp; the latter's generally low reputation as governor.

Despite some early successes, Shapp's Administration got bogged down in a quagmire of corruption he did not control and fiscal problems he found difficult to resolve. Bored and frustrated he spent much of his second term in a quixotic and embarrassing quest for the 1976 presidential nomination--before ignominiously turning state government over to Dick Thornburgh and the Republicans for the next eight years.

Essentially Shapp was a horrendous politician. His forte was managing and captaining a business not the give and take of state politics. He proved the old adage that running a business is not the same as running a government. He was a brilliant campaigner but an inept leader.

Ed Rendell has shown none of these shortcomings. Moreover, he possesses an array of political and leadership skills not evident in Shapp's performance--particularly his persuasive manner, his understanding of the importance of the legislature to any policy success, and his willingness to achieve consensus.

Still, Shapp's fate is a cautionary tale. Governors are evaluated ultimately by the standard they set for themselves and the expectations they raise. Shapp set that bar high, but then allowed his administration to dissipate into a morass of indifference and scandal. Rendell has similarly set the bar very high. If he delivers, he will probably be remembered as one of Pennsylvania great governors. If he fails to deliver, he will have one more thing to share with Shapp.

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