“Every once in a while, somebody has to get the bureaucracy by the neck and shake it loose and say, ‘Stop doing what you’re doing.’” — Ronald Reagan

Gov. Ed Rendell is not given to quoting Ronald Reagan, but this past week he might have been tempted himself to grab for a few bureaucratic necks to shake, and Reagan’s exhortation to the bureaucracy to ”stop doing what you're doing” was probably some of the milder language Pennsylvania's governor considered using.

Of one thing we can be certain: On a steamy hot July day in the first summer of his first year in office, Pennsylvania's governor got a lesson on just how independent and ornery state bureaucracy can be on occasion.

Some brief background: When Rendell was Mayor of Philadelphia, one of his favorite programs was the beautification of the downtown, particularly the area around Broad Street, known as "the Avenue of the Arts." A main part of the beautification effort was the installation of some 15 decorative crosswalks as part of a 15 million "streetscape" project. The crosswalks were designed to enhance the pedestrian ambiance of the area while calling attention to the extensive redevelopment in center city.

Most people agreed that the decorative crosswalks were much needed and positive improvements to Philadelphia's main street--most, but not all.

Among those few not charmed by the crosswalks was Pennsylvania's Department of Transportation (yes, the same PennDOT that nominally answers to the governor). Apparently, in conspiracy with Philadelphia Streets Department officials, PennDOT decided that the crosswalks were either not safe or too expensive to maintain.

And so, faster than you can say "jackhammer," they ripped them out--gone, gone, and gone--and replaced them with PennDOT's all purpose asphalt and white-line painting. Readers interested in new techniques for impressing the boss will want to take a special note of this one.

The story has an almost happy ending. Rendell's private reaction to all this has not been preserved for posterity, but PennDOT's public reaction has been. The department has apologized and promised to "restore" the streets "pedestrian character."

We haven't been told so far how much all this restored pedestrian character will cost, but we have a pretty good idea of who is going to pay for it.

In the meantime, Gov. Rendell may now have a wee bit more empathy for Ronald Reagan's frustration with the federal bureaucracy, and we have an excellent case study of just how unresponsive government bureaucrats can be to elected officials who nominally are the boss.
In democratic theory, the people elect governors and presidents, who then control the bureaucrats. That in essence is what representative democratic government is supposed to be about.

But the real world, as the PennDOT vignette illustrates, often doesn't look much like this ideal world. In the real world, government bureaucracies are often as powerful as, or even more powerful than, their nominal bosses. They have their own way of doing things and they are not always responsive to direction.

There is a wonderful old story about Harry Truman that makes the point. Truman, it is told, was sitting in the Oval Office one day in late 1952 shortly after Dwight Eisenhower had won the presidency, ending 20 years of Democrat control. His chief of staff came into the room to find the president chuckling to himself, so he asked what was so amusing.

Truman responded that he had just been sitting there in the Oval Office and thinking how much fun it would be to be a fly on the wall the first day that Eisenhower himself actually was president. "Ike," according to Truman, a five star general and former World War II supreme commander, would sit down and issue this order and that order just as he had done when in the military -- and expect that his orders would be carried out. But instead, no one would pay any attention to him. He would be ignored. Truman wanted to see the frustration Eisenhower would experience.

Truman may have exaggerated a little about how powerless presidents can feel, but he had been there for seven long years, and he understood.

Nor is any of this much of a surprise to academics studying bureaucracy. Scholars have enumerated some of the main reasons that bureaucracies remain independent, despite their nominal subservience to elected officials. Among the major factors:

**Bureaucratic Culture** -- Bureaucracies comprise organizations that develop values, traditions, and standard operating procedures. Over the years, the way they do things becomes reinforcing and resistant to change. Governors and presidents come and go, but bureaucracies live on forever.

**Civil Service and Collective Bargaining** -- Most bureaucrats today have civil service protection or similar assurance under union bargaining agreements. Mostly this is a good thing because it has removed the worst features of the patronage practices common in earlier times. But it is now all but impossible to fire someone with civil service protection, including someone who may not be responsive to the direction of elected officials.

**Pervasive Legalism** -- Increasingly, bureaucrats are constrained by legal decisions and judicial orders -- legal decisions and judicial orders that may contradict, contravene, or even countermand orders given by elected officials. Today, it is the law, and the lawyers who practice it and the judges who interpret it, and not elected officials that often determine the scope and limits of bureaucratic actions.

**Rise of Professionalism** -- Modern bureaucracies are increasing composed of trained professionals -- engineers, lawyers, accountants, geologist, biologists, etc. And all these professions have unique worldviews and norms for doing things, worldviews and norms that sometimes are in conflict with policy or program direction from elected officials.

Let's be clear, bureaucratic independence is not always bad. Some of the causes of it, including professionalism and civil service reform, are positive changes that have added immeasurably to the efficiency and effectiveness of government.
Moreover, there are some clear instances where courageous agencies have stood up to wrong-headed politicians, and we are all better off for it. And there is much to say for continuity of policy and orderly change.

Still, it is also good for us to remember that even in a democratic society, the boss is the guy actually in charge--and that may not always be who we think it is.

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Politically Uncorrected™ is published twice monthly. Dr. G. Terry Madonna is a Professor of Public Affairs at Franklin & Marshall College, and Dr. Michael Young is a former Professor of Politics and Public Affairs at Penn State University and Managing Partner at Michael Young Strategic Research. The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of any institution or organization with which they are affiliated. This article may be used in whole or part only with appropriate attribution. Copyright © 2003 Terry Madonna and Michael Young.