Choosing Number Two

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In government it is too frequently the case that what matters most to citizens attracts the least attention. Certainly that is so with Senate Bill 170 now pending before the Pennsylvania legislature. SB 170 would require gubernatorial candidates to select their own lieutenant governor running mates--replacing the present, wholly chaotic system in which wannabes for lieutenant governor run separately in a free for all primary election.

The proposed legislation would mandate choices at least 90 days before the fall election, and subject them to respective party approvals. Under present law, Republican and Democratic candidates for governor and lieutenant governor are nominated separately, but must then run together in general elections. Gubernatorial candidates may endorse, but can’t select their running mates, and they don’t run as a team on the primary ballot.

SB 170 is good legislation and some version of it should be enacted; presently written, it requires gubernatorial nominees to name a lieutenant governor candidate to the ticket, much as presidential candidates now do; alternately it could be written to require candidates for governor and lieutenant governor to run in the primary as a team, as they do now in general elections.

Either option is dramatically better than the electoral circus now in use. Lieutenant governor primaries as now constituted are travesties--essentially intramural brawls involving as many as nine candidates, in which regional voting, name familiarity, and gender are heavy influences on winning.

Usually voters know very little about the candidates for lieutenant governor, and nothing at all about what those candidates might do if contingency thrust them into the governor’s chair. Nor under the existing system is there any way to be assured that any lieutenant governor will be qualified to succeed to the governorship, much less be in agreement with the governor’s policy direction.

The clear contrast is with the U.S vice presidency. Unlike Pennsylvania gubernatorial nominees, presidential nominees now personally select their running mates, weighing carefully the running mates compatibility, capacity to succeed to the presidency, and support for key policies. In Pennsylvania, none of this matters: candidates for lieutenant governor are virtually unknown to the voters and therefore are not subject to any real scrutiny for competency or compatibility with gubernatorial candidates.

Perhaps this worked well enough in times past. But, no longer! Once state government was a minor player in our lives, and governors, if not expendable, were readily replaceable. But those times are no more. Today state government is a multi-billion dollar enterprise that deeply influences the lives of more than 12 million.

It is time to recognize that Pennsylvania’s lieutenant governorship also has undergone a transformation--from a job once considered marginal if not superfluous, to a job analogous to the national vice-presidency, where the incumbent must be qualified to succeed if the need arises.
Let’s be candid about the political ramifications of SB 170: the bill does have bi-partisan support, but its strongest advocates come from the Republican side of the aisle. More than a little of the partisan enthusiasm here derives from a desire to embarrass Governor Ed Rendell, whose own running mate Lieutenant Governor Catherine Baker Knoll has received sharply negative media coverage. Republican strategists would love to see the governor twist and turn a little on this one during the crucial run-up to a gubernatorial election year.

So we have here a “Harrisburg moment” – good legislation being supported for not always good motives. The likely outcome is a familiar one, much needed legislation killed by partisan infighting and political expediency.

But this doesn’t have to be the case. In fact there is an excellent example from federal experience that provides a road map. After Franklin Roosevelt’s unprecedented third (and fourth) term as president, a movement grew to amend the Constitution so that no one could be elected to more than two terms (or serve more than 10 years).

By the time the amendment (the 22nd) wended its way through Congress in 1951, Roosevelt was gone and Harry Truman was in the White House. Not surprisingly some felt the proposed amendment seemed aimed at Truman (just as some now feel SB 170 is aimed at Knoll). This perception threatened to derail the amendment until a solution was offered and accepted to exempt Truman from the amendment’s provisions. The final amendment read:

> But this Article shall not apply to any person holding the office of President, when this Article was proposed by the Congress, and shall not prevent any person who may be holding the office of President, or acting as President, during the term within which this Article becomes operative from holding the office of President or acting as President during the remainder of such term.

SB 170 is an amendment to the state’s election code and something very similar could be done with it--the legislation could simply exempt persons now in office from its provisions, or more simply move the effective date back. Short term political considerations should not be allowed to eviscerate the long term interest Pennsylvanians have in establishing an orderly succession to the state’s highest office.