Reform: At the Crossroads and in the Crosshairs
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Most reform movements exhibit a natural life cycle of birth, growth, and decline. Often conceived in the white hot passion of public outrage, they typically achieve some initial successes that broaden the movement and spur motivation toward broader goals and further aims. But that very success brings new challenges, changing goals, and internal frictions. Eventually the reform impulse ebbs, divisions among supporters sap focus, and the cause of reform itself loses its way.

Sometimes aging reform movements simply fade away. More often some semblance of the original cause survives, but it mutates into the routinized rhythms of movement politics: reform adherents continue to propose, profess, and protest. But the energy is gone, the passion spent. At this point many reform movements begin a slow amble off the public stage and out of public life. They have reached the point where not much is expected from them and that expectation is not disappointed.

Pennsylvania’s governmental reform movement has not yet reached this latter and terminal stage. But neither is it still in the full bloom of youth. Poised at the juncture of this year’s election and the upcoming critical 2008 electoral cycle, the state’s reform movement has reached a critical crossroad. Where it goes from here and what it accomplishes will be determined by decisions made in the next few months. Indeed, those next few months will be as vital to reform as the past two and one half years--a period that has virtually convulsed state politics.

It has been a tempestuous time. Since the infamous pay hike enacted by the Pennsylvania legislature in July of 2005, Pennsylvania government has been locked in the throes of fierce struggle--pitting reformers who would bring accountability and responsiveness to state government against the deeply rooted anti-reform political culture that has made the state one of the most hide-bound, resistant-to-change states in the nation.

In round one the unlikely reformers shocked the state’s political community by denying retention to a sitting Supreme Court justice for the first time in state history. In round two the reformers scored again by orchestrating a huge turnover in the state legislature--54 new members were elected in 2006, the largest turnover in 30 years.

But this year in round three, the reformers dramatically overreached when some of the groups went after most of the county and state jurists standing in the retention elections--trying to tie them to the controversial 2005 pay raise and the controversial state Supreme Court that so fueled voter outrage earlier. When all but a single jurist was retained, the reform movement suffered a humiliating defeat--a defeat that has clearly brought reform to its moment of truth.

Alas it is a moment that has been reached without a great deal accomplished toward the reform goals that drove much of the early reform movement. Impressive electoral victories notwithstanding, over the past two years, the legislature has done very little to enact substantive reform.
That failure to advance the reform agenda deserves emphasis. While the legislature has made some process changes in operating procedures, little has been done to change the culture in the legislature. And it is that culture with its perverse incentives, Wild West ethos, and "damn the public" mentality that resists reform. Consider: the state still has a weak lobbying law in which no penalties exist for violating it, it still has no limits on campaign contributions or on what campaign money can be spent; and it still has no limits or restrictions on gifts or travel paid for by lobbyists. Now some three years into the reform era, there have been almost no actual reforms.

But to conclude that reform has so far largely failed is not to conclude that it may not ultimately succeed. The issues and problems that originally drove the reform impulse are far from mooted. Pennsylvania remains rooted in a political culture nurtured in the 19th century. Moreover, luck or perhaps fate has tossed up another opportunity for the reformers; the unfolding "bonus gate" scandal now engulfing the legislature is certain to fan the flames of reform well into the next election cycle.

But this is a second chance for the reform movement only if the lessons taught by this year’s election are grasped. Two things are clear. The first is that the pay raise is moribund as a campaign issue; it did not motivate voters in the recent elections and it will not do so next year. The second lesson is that the reform movement must move beyond "body count" politics that crudely measure success in terms of political scalps harvested. Blunt instrument electoral tactics designed to "clean sweep" all legislators out of office are no longer a substitute for work on a comprehensive reform agenda that can move Pennsylvania forward.

If reform is to survive, it can no longer feed on pay raise resentment nor depend on electoral revenge. Reform must offer voters a vision of what needs to be done rather than a list of who should be done in. And that list of what needs to be done must move beyond feel good reforms with cosmetic appeal that won’t change the political culture. Fundamental reform is not about replacing individual legislators or having a smaller legislature or even reducing the cost of the legislature--not because these suggestions are necessarily bad ideas--but because they alone won’t change the self-serving culture that still dominates in Harrisburg.

Reform only becomes a reality if cultural change takes place--and that is going to take culture changing reforms such as open records, a ban on lobbyist paid gifts and travel, limits on campaign contributions, limits on what candidates can do with campaign money, and a lobbying law with penalties for violators. Only if the reform movement goes in that direction will reform survive, only if reform survives can Harrisburg fundamentally change, and only if Harrisburg fundamentally changes, does it all matter.

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