Is Tom Corbett a Revolutionary?
February 18, 2011

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Revolutionary, radical, iconoclast, insurrectionist—these are not words one usually uses to describe Pennsylvania’s new governor, Tom Corbett. Yet if Corbett achieves most or all of his announced first term agenda, he will easily become the most transformative governor in modern state history.

Compared to Corbett, Tom Ridge was a slacker, Bob Casey a slouch, Dick Thornburgh a shirker, and Milton Shapp a mere idler.

Skeptical that Corbett will pursue his ambitious agenda? Then consider this: most governors, including recently departed Ed Rendell, actually accomplish most of their aims in office. Contrary to much received wisdom, most governors keep most of their promises most of the time.

Just how sweeping is the Corbett change agenda? Its details won’t be revealed until his budget speech in early March. But this much is clear: Corbett and his Republican allies are proposing to remake state government in ways not seen in anyone’s lifetime.

Massive budget reductions are just the opening act. Corbett intends to shrink state government, eliminate the state liquor monopoly, reduce business taxes, institute school vouchers, pass lawsuit reform, restructure public welfare, reform the state legislature, and much more.

And he has pledged to do all of this without raising taxes or fees.

What sets Corbett so apart from his predecessors is the scope of his goals. Past governors have run campaigns to “reform” and “change” the culture in Harrisburg. Running against Harrisburg is not new. Nor are many of Corbett’s ideas, such as privatizing liquor stores or instituting school vouchers. Both Dick Thornburgh in the 1980s and Tom Ridge in the 1990s pushed similar ideas.

What is new, however, is that past governors never promised, as Corbett has, to pursue their reform agendas while scrupulously avoiding tax increases. In fact, governors have done exactly the opposite during the last four recessions dating back to the 1970s. They have sought their policy goals by expanding the functions of state government and raising state taxes to meet budget deficits.

Milton Shapp illustrates the pattern. He won the governorship in 1970 not by eschewing tax hikes, but by embracing them. During his successful campaign he energetically called for the first permanent income tax in state history. Similarly, both Dick Thornburgh in 1983 and Bob Casey in 1991 supported income tax hikes during recessionary years.

Corbett, in marked contrast, has rejected any kind of tax hike, calling instead for major downsizing of state government along with wide-ranging privatization of governmental functions. He is attempting to tackle the largest change agenda in a century. In the process, he aims to fundamentally restructure the role and function of state government.
Can he do it?

Certainly there are some reasons to expect him to succeed. As noted earlier, most governors accomplish most of their agendas. Some, such as Ed Rendell, end up relatively unpopular, while others, like Tom Ridge and Bob Casey, leave office well liked. But liked or disliked, governors usually get the job done.

A second reason to expect Corbett to succeed is the nature of the legislature serving with him. Since the infamous pay hike fiasco of 2005, almost half of the state House and one third of the state Senate has been replaced by new members, many of them committed to reform. Few, if any, past governors have been blessed with a legislature more likely to oppose new taxes, support privatization initiatives, and seek structural reforms in state government—all key Corbett goals. Moreover, Corbett will be aided by a new, vigorous GOP leadership dramatically more likely to support fundamental structural change.

Nevertheless, there are two huge unknowns, both largely beyond Corbett’s influence, which may thwart him. One is the economy—how fast it will recover and how much it will grow. If the recession should unexpectedly deepen or the recovery slow materially, Corbett may have to deal with an even larger deficit, adding considerable pressure to increase taxes.

The second unknown is the amount of financial aid forthcoming from the federal government. Presently, the outlook for substantial assistance from Washington is not auspicious. Fewer federal dollars may generate strong pressures to raise state taxes.

Finally, perhaps the greatest unknown is Corbett himself. He is in many ways a blank slate. A career prosecutor, he has never served in the legislature or Congress. Nor has he made policy as a member of the executive branch he now heads. His ideology is largely unknown. How he will react to unfolding challenges is impossible to forecast.

He may, as other governors have done, react pragmatically to the myriad challenges he faces, seeking solutions that work politically rather than ideas that resonate ideologically. On the other hand, he may evolve into the committed ideologue he has sometimes evoked, using his tenure in office to push a transformative agenda and bring fundamental change to state government.

Meanwhile, the clock is ticking. Tom Corbett is going to work on what may be the greatest set of challenges faced by any Pennsylvania governor in a century. One thing, however, is certain. Either Pennsylvania is about to experience dramatic change in a short period—or Tom Corbett is.