From Light Governor to Lt. Governor
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by Dr. G. Terry Madonna and Dr. Michael Young

One of the worst kept political secrets in Harrisburg received a very public airing recently. In some high profile press reporting on the state's Lieutenant Governor, the reading public learned that incumbent Cathy Baker Knoll has some problems. Actually she has many problems.

Among them: staff turnovers of huge proportions in her office; some dubious government decisions made by members of her immediate family; allegations by some state Senators that she incompetently handles her job as presiding officer of the Senate; and most ignominiously we learn that Governor Ed Rendell ignores her.

Nor is the governor a majority of one here. Not to make too fine a point of it, but Pennsylvania's second in command is not taken very seriously by Harrisburg officialdom.

A reasonable first reaction is to say "so what." Conventional wisdom holds that the Lt Governor does very little that matters. After all, the office is known colloquially around Harrisburg as "Light Governor." And with reason--it has virtually no major responsibilities.

Yes, Lt Governors do preside over the Senate. But this role is largely ceremonial and procedural. Nor do administrative responsibilities involve much heavy lifting. The incoming governor customarily hands out a policy portfolio to the new Lt Governor. For example, Bill Scranton under Dick Thornburgh had energy and Mark Schweiker under Tom Ridge had emergency management. But there's nothing in these assignments that any cabinet secretary or other gubernatorial advisor could not perform.

Lt Governor's do serve as chair of the Pardons Board. But no huge job here either, since the Board is advisory to the governor. So, why worry about the Lt Governor, and especially about how qualified he or she might be. We demand little from the office, so why be surprised if little is what we get? Que Serra Serra!

Still, it is interesting to ask just why Pennsylvanians are so cavalier about who ends up Lt Governor, why are we nonchalant about number two? Part of the answer lies in the state's improbable good luck with long-lived governors. In fact, no incumbent governor in modern history has died in office, making moot the question of whether the Lt Governor is qualified to pick up the burden of office from a fallen governor. None have had to do so.

But our luck has been a close thing. Significantly, the last two governor's had their tenure interrupted--Bob Casey by a double organ transplant and Tom Ridge by his resignation to become homeland security czar in the Bush administration.

Both Lt Governors--who had to serve as acting Chief Executive or as Chief Executive--performed quite well. No one seriously challenged their credentials to serve as governor. Both largely continued the agenda of the current administration. Mark Singel was more hemmed in by Casey's top advisors and Schweiker had the Quecreek mining disaster to deal with, but both left office with reputations enhanced. Pennsylvanians rightly consider themselves fortunate in both replacements.
Surely luck is nice to have when you need it, but it is rarely a winning long-term strategy. Sooner or later luck runs out; often it seems at the worst possible moment. And it's only chance and good fortune that have produced qualified Lt Governors for Pennsylvania when they were needed.

The fundamental problem is the nomination process. Candidates for Governor and Lt Governor are nominated separately in primary elections, then run together in general elections. Regional voting and name familiarity are heavy influences on winning. Typically voters know little about the candidates for Lt Governor, and even less about what they would do if the big office were suddenly thrust upon them.

The clear contrast is with the vice presidency. Presidential nominees now select their running mates, weighing carefully the running mates personal compatibility, capacity to succeed to the presidency, and support for key policies. In Pennsylvania, none of this matters, since Lt Governor candidates run separately, and are subjected to virtually no screening for competency or compatibility with gubernatorial candidates, as presidential candidates face.

In truth, Pennsylvania selects its Lt Governor in a dangerous high stakes game of political roulette. Gubernatorial candidates may endorse, but can't select their running mates, and they don't run as a team on the primary ballot. Not only can't gubernatorial candidates pick their running mates, occasionally they don't even try.

Most notable is the current case of Governor Rendell and Lt Governor Knoll. Rendell endorsed no one when he ran for governor in 2002. Knoll won a crowded primary for the second spot--aided significantly by her statewide name recognition from earlier races. Once she won her party's primary, she became Lt Governor of Pennsylvania by virtue of Rendell's election.

Under the existing system there is no way to be assured that any Lt Governor will be qualified to succeed to the governorship, much less be in agreement with the governor's policy direction.

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, and governors if not quite irreplaceable, are pretty darn important.

It is time to recognize that Pennsylvania's Lt 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.

American political institutions resist reform. In Pennsylvania, this resistance has developed into a political art form. We usually wait for crisis or even tragedy before fixing what clearly needs to be fixed. And a simple fix can resolve this particular problem. We can require candidates for Governor and Lt. Governor to run in the primary as a team, as they do now in general elections. Alternately, we can allow successful gubernatorial nominees to name a Lt. Governor candidate to the ticket, much as presidential candidates now do.

Either option works. Both get the job done. This one is a free shot. The only way to make things worse is continuing to select Lt. Governors the way we do now.
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 © 2004 Terry Madonna and Michael Young.