Restoring Confidence
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by Dr. G. Terry Madonna and Dr. Michael Young

It's pretty grim. The successive crises of the last several years have produced the greatest erosion of public confidence in the Pennsylvania legislature in modern history. The low confidence levels have been repeatedly demonstrated in recent polls. Last month's Quinnipiac University Poll reported only one in four voters approve of the job the state legislature is doing.

There isn't much mystery why confidence is so low. Three political debacles spread over a span of four years are to blame. The first was the now infamous 16 to 54 percent legislative pay hike in 2005. Though later repealed, it enraged the electorate and resulted in the largest turnover of state legislators in a quarter century.

The second occurred in July 2008 when the first in a series of charges against 25 lawmakers and staffers were announced in what has now become known as "bonus gate." Additional charges are likely to be lodged against others, keeping the issue squarely before the public.

The third was the shamelessly late adoption of the current state fiscal budget - a budget not finalized until some six months into the new fiscal year. Before it was over Pennsylvania would become the last state in the union to adopt a budget. In the process, state employees, state funded programs, and thousands of state citizens were reduced to little more than political bargaining chips in the high stakes poker game played by state elected officials.

These political outrages would have shaken confidence in any state legislature, but taken together they have precipitated a crisis of confidence not seen before by any living Pennsylvanian. Whether the legislature can recover remains to be seen. Yet there are some immediate steps that can be taken to begin the process of restoring public confidence. Here are four of them:

1. **Time to Stop the Bleeding** - British Field Marshall Bill Slim once made the wry observation, "Nothing is so good for the morale of the troops as occasionally to see a dead general." Even the Field Marshall, however, might agree that too much of a good thing is no longer a good thing. Indeed the state legislature has now mustered more than enough dead generals. The list of fallen leaders - either defeated at the ballot box or criminally charged - defies almost any historical precedent: two former house speakers, a house majority whip, a senate president pro tempore, a senate majority leader, and a senate appropriations chair. Certainly some of this bloodletting was necessary. But it has left a dangerous power vacuum in the capital where sometimes no one seems in charge and no one is accountable. It is time for strong, focused, and responsible leadership to step up to the plate, to bring together the divergent forces now fracturing policy consensus, and to restore the badly shaken public confidence in state leaders.

2. **The Budget: Time to Get It Right** - The constitutionally mandated June 30 deadline has been ignored by both the governor and the legislature for seven straight years, blatantly violating the constitution each time. Equally horrendous has been the practice of treating budget adoption as a political chessboard, producing endless policy gridlock, ideological infighting, and political posturing. To restore confidence, budget
reform is critical as Pennsylvania enters another budget season with yet another looming deficit. And reform must be accompanied by appropriate penalties for failure to adopt a timely, balanced budget.

3. **Open Up Ethics Reform** - The Pennsylvania Legislature may not be the most unethical in the country, but it is one of the most secretive and least welcoming to public participation. One major improvement would be to adjudicate ethics complaints by including representatives of the public in those proceedings. A related ethics issue is gifts to public officials. Gifts must be reported, but there is no limit on the type of gift or the value of the gift. Why not place a limit or even an outright ban or major limits on gifts to legislators and their staffs?

4. **Take First Steps to Constitutional Reform** - Finally and probably most important, Pennsylvania in 2010 is running a 21st century government with 19th century processes and structures. There is really only one way to fix things. Pennsylvania needs a constitutional convention. The last one took place in the late 19th century, although a limited convention was held in 1968. Planning and holding a convention is a massive undertaking that will take years to carry out, but the legislature can get it started in 2010 by passing enabling legislation that places the question of a convention before the voters in 2011. Probably nothing would go further toward truly restoring confidence in state government than a clear indication of support for constitutional reform from the legislature.

One or even all of these actions together will not restore citizens’ confidence in their legislature overnight. The damage is deep and widespread. But they do comprise a good start toward persuading Pennsylvanians that the worst may be over.

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