It was stunning.

The events that last week led to the election of a new speaker of the Pennsylvania House stupefied the most seasoned of political observers. Amid a series of secret meetings, furtive communications, and audacious plotting, Democratic leaders, aided by some Republicans and with the active participation of Governor Rendell, engineered a coup that elected Denny O’Brien of Philadelphia to speaker.

What happened was riveting for anyone with even a faint political pulse.

Not that the plot didn’t feature some standard Pennsylvania staples. In particular, the legislature’s penchant for clandestine meetings and surreptitious intrigues was a familiar theme. Indeed, most of the Democratic caucus in the House was unaware that when their leader, Bill DeWeese, put O’Brien’s name in nomination, a deal had been struck. Nevertheless, the end result, a Democratic majority supporting a Republican for Speaker, was remarkable and unprecedented. Still more extraordinary, it was done waving high the banner of reform in a state best known for its anti-reform traditions.

The story has been widely covered by the state press, and the pertinent facts are well known. Missing; however, has been any real explanation of why it happened at all, and why the reform mantra has come to predominate in state politics.

The question is not an idle one. Since the Civil War, Pennsylvania has been notorious for its anti-reform, stick-in-the-mud, slow to change political culture. And the notoriety has been well earned. For decades, dozens of reform proposals, designed to modernize state politics, have been ignored, stalled, or amended beyond recognition by Pennsylvania’s reigning political establishment.

So why reform now?

Two main reasons have been offered to explain Pennsylvania’s growing appetite for reform. One of these might be called the "Good Government Hypothesis." This thesis argues that good government goals are now driving the political class toward reform. At long last, leaders of the legislative coup have recognized the merits of reform, and consequently they have acted in the public interest to clean up the conduct of the legislature and bring about major change to a body heretofore totally resistant to any kind of change.

But is this conversion genuine? It requires we believe that all of the coup leaders have experienced battlefield conversions. One searches their political resumes in vain for any earlier signs of reform convictions. Most have never shown any inclination to reform, and, in fact, have stifled previous efforts at reform.

There is another, more plausible explanation for the legislative drama that played out in Harrisburg. Call it the "Good Politics Hypothesis;” it argues that the emergence of reform on the political agenda demonstrates the
raw, unvarnished pursuit of political power. In other words, look less to the public interest motivations of reformers and more to real politic.

Reform has moved center stage in Pennsylvania because it is now good politics to be pro-reform. And it has become good politics after some 15 months of electoral carnage that included as causalities one Supreme Court Justice not retained, 31 legislative retirements, 17 primary incumbents defeated, nine general election losses—and an institutional approval rating below that of President Bush.

So, reform has become politically viable in Pennsylvania because it is now good politics to be pro-reform. Pennsylvania’s Darwinian-like political establishment is evolving, albeit slowly, to adapt to this new reality in the political environment. State politicians are becoming reformers for the most basic of reasons; they want to survive in the era of reform Pennsylvania is now entering. To be against reform is to be for extinction.

So where do we go from here? The present moment seems to offer an historic opportunity to wrench the state out of its 18th and 19th century roots and thrust it firmly into the 21st century—able at last to take a leadership position among the American states appropriate to Pennsylvania’s size and importance.

And how do we get there?

Some thoughtful Pennsylvanians, including many legislators, believe reform goals—such as a more open, accountable legislature and internal institutional changes—can be handled incrementally with new legislation and internal regulations. Other equally serious Pennsylvanians think that piecemeal reforms won’t work; they believe the need for comprehensive review and change can’t be addressed except by convening a constitutional convention.

This is a key question: Can reforms be enacted piecemeal and incrementally, or is a constitutional convention needed? Which is the right approach?

We have arrived at a fork in the road.

If we do opt for a constitutional convention, history provides us some guidance of how things might work. Pennsylvania has had no comprehensive reform for more than 100 years. The state did have a constitutional convention in 1968, but it was a limited convention with limited powers and limited goals. It made no changes to the basic structure and organization of the legislative and executive branches. In many ways, the 1968 Convention illustrates the piecemeal approach.

For an example of more comprehensive change, we must go back to the 1870’s when the state last convened a general constitutional convention. In 1873, a constitutional convention was held that dealt comprehensively with the structure and process of state government. Most of the governmental structure in place today dates to that convention.

The 1873 reforms reflected massive public support for constitutional change. Questions exist whether similar public sentiment prevails today—or whether perhaps we are in an era more comparable to the limited changes brought about by the 1968 convention.
What seems clear; however, is that we have reached a critical juncture during which a window on reform is open in Pennsylvania. How long that window might be open, or even how wide it is, are not yet known. These are all issues that Pennsylvanians should be discussing in the next few months.

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