

## OPINION: CAN SEN. TOM KEAN JR. REGROUP BATTERED REPUBLICANS?

CARL GOLDEN | NOVEMBER 28, 2017

Ironically, given the Republican rout, Minority Leader Kean Jr. could help his party deliver a viable alternative to the governor-elect's left-of-center predilections



Carl Golden

Forty-four years ago, Brendan Byrne was elected New Jersey governor, amassing a record plurality of 721,378 votes and, in the process, driving the Republican membership in the General Assembly to a historic low – 14 seats.

The partisan divide – 66 Democrats and 14 Republicans – meant the Democratic Party held 83 percent of the seats in the Assembly. For every one Republican, there were five Democrats. It was the kind of electoral beatdown that is almost impossible to absorb and still survive.

Senate Republicans were spared the devastation because the state Senate was not on the ballot that year.

The leader of this tiny band of Assembly Republicans was Tom Kean, an Essex County Assemblyman who served as speaker in the two years prior to Byrne's landslide.

Ironically, it was Kean 12 years later who surpassed Byrne's plurality, winning re-election in 1985 by 794,229 votes, a victory margin unlikely to ever be exceeded.

Unable to influence policy or win legislative approval for their proposals, Republicans looked to Kean to go up against the majority and establish the party as one of ideas, vision and insight capable of solving the state's pressing problems.

### **Against the grain**

Skillfully utilizing the Assembly parliamentary rules and the freedom to offer amendatory language to Democratic legislation, Kean routinely placed newly elected Democrats – primarily those in normally Republican districts who took office only because of the Byrne landslide – in the uncomfortable position of casting public votes that often went against the grain of their constituents.

He masterfully used the media to present his party's case. He was accessible almost to a fault in dealing with reporters, but it was precisely this quality that led to his comments sharing equal billing with Democrats in news accounts.

He spoke, of course, for only 14 legislators, but the media amplification of his ideas succeeded in gaining as much public attention as those of the Democratic majority.

It is fitting, then, that as Republicans enter the 2018 legislative session with 24 members of the Assembly and 15 members of the Senate the individual best positioned to emerge as their leader is Sen. Tom Kean Jr. (R-Union), the current minority leader.

He is experienced, articulate, moderate in his political ideology, and pragmatic in his approach to issues.

Gov.-elect Phil Murphy has been clear, both during his campaign and in public appearances since, that his administration will move farther to the left, embracing tax and spending increases and pursuing a host of new or expanded social programs at an as-yet-undetermined cost.

### **Fiscally sensitive**

His agenda provides fertile ground for Kean to establish Republicans as fiscally sensitive and seriously concerned about the impact of Murphy's agenda on middle-income New Jerseyans.

There is a great deal for Kean to confront and offer alternative viable ideas, avoiding the risk of Republicans becoming the party of "no," opposing the governor merely for the sake of opposing him.

He can be an effective counterbalance to Murphy's left-of-center agenda, aggressively pursuing a more moderate, responsible approach rather than a rigid ideological one.

Kean has demonstrated his leadership qualities, holding his caucus together on tough votes while effectively arguing his party's case for fiscal restraint and austere government.

With a Republican governor and a solidly Democratic Legislature, Kean has been an effective spokesman for his party, possessing an ability to navigate the often tricky political waters common in divided government.

With Democrats in full control of state government, the task of minority Republicans is to assert themselves vigorously and convince taxpayers that they take precedence over the wishes and desires of private-interest factions who hope to exert significant influence over public policy decisions.

Kean is the obvious choice to lead that effort.

As the only state official elected at large and armed with Caesar-like constitutional powers, New Jersey governors dominate the political/governmental environment. Gov. Chris Christie is no exception.

By so thoroughly overshadowing all else, Christie became the Republican Party. The party's fortunes rose and fell with Christie's and, as the governor prepares to depart his office in seven weeks, the party is in a weakened state, financially and organizationally, and its brand has lost whatever luster it once had.

### **Establishing his legacy**

In the time he has left, Christie has begun a legacy tour, insisting his administration has been a successful one and the party has benefitted from it, even though there is a considerable body of evidence to the contrary.

Christie will leave office with the lowest public approval standing of any of his predecessors. Republicans lost seats in the Legislature and his lieutenant governor's campaign to succeed him failed in considerable measure because of her association with his administration.

The slate is pristine as the new Legislature and governor assume office in January. The mantle of leadership is there for the taking and, should Kean Jr. decide to try it on, he'll find it fits very comfortably, indeed.

(Full disclosure: I served on Kean Sr.'s Assembly staff from 1971 to 1980 and as his press secretary during his two terms as governor.)

Carl Golden served as press secretary for Republican Gov. Thomas Kean for eight years and as communications director for Republican Gov. Christie Whitman for three years. He is currently a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.

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