



Gov. Chris Christie is no Reagan: This boss is not born to Ron

By Paul Mulshine/The Star Ledger

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Amanda Brown/The Star-Ledger

Gov. Chris Christie at the creation of the task force on affordable housing, flanked by its leader, former state Sen. Marcia Karrow.

At the beginning of the Christie administration, I speculated on whether our new governor would be a **Jimmy Carter** clone or a **Ronald Reagan** replica.

The evidence is in: Gov. **Chris Christie's** the second coming of Carter.

In his brief time in office, Christie has shown himself to have the peanut farmer's penchant for policy that creates enemies on both sides.

The Gipper never made that mistake. One side hated him. The other loved him. All he had to do was win the middle.

Christie, by comparison, has managed in his short time in office to make enemies left, right and center. That talent was in evidence Tuesday during the debut of his first major initiative in the area of property tax reform, the school-funding formula in his first budget.

In defending the formula before the state Senate budget committee, Education Commissioner **Bret Schundler** caught hell from liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans, urbanites and suburbanites, southerners and northerners, and so on. No senator had a scintilla of sympathy for the former mayor of Jersey City, not even the representative of the home town he had worked so hard to spare from deep cuts.

State Sen. **Sandra Cunningham** slammed Schundler for fashioning a formula that she said would cause 300 layoffs in Jersey City. Cunningham said she wanted more state aid for Jersey City and the 30 other largely urban districts singled out for special treatment in the state Supreme Court's controversial Abbott decisions.

But her fellow Democrat, **Barbara Buono**, socked Schundler for the opposite reason: His formula, the senator from Middlesex County charged, was sending more than 60 percent of total aid to the Abbotts at the expense of the 550 suburban and rural districts.

On the GOP side, state Sen. **Joe Pennacchio** of Morris County demanded to know how an Abbott district like **Asbury Park** could get \$30,000 per pupil in state aid while some school districts in Pennacchio's — and Christie's — home county of Morris had their aid reduced to little or nothing.

As for the Reaganesque approach, that came from **Mike Doherty**, the West Point grad who represents rural Warren and Hunterdon counties. Doherty cut to the heart of the matter: Christie's kowtowing to the court on the school-funding formula.

"The idea we can't control our destiny ever because we always have to run it by the Supreme Court is defied by what the Constitution says and defied by the oath of office we take," he said.

The ultraconservative went on to say that "we are explicitly authorized under the Constitution to make these decisions. And when the Supreme Court decides they're going to go and make school-funding decisions, they're explicitly violating the Constitution."

Now that, boys and girls, is how Ronald Reagan would have handled this sort of thing. He would have infuriated every liberal while rallying every conservative. Then he'd fight for the middle-class homeowners long denied property tax relief.

Among the liberals who would be outraged by such an approach, I suspect, would be most of Christie's cabinet. In an act of Carterite compromise, Christie gave the most important position in his administration to a Democrat from Essex County, **Paula Dow**. And on Tuesday, Schundler repeatedly cited Dow's opinions as crucial to the adoption of the school-funding policy.

That sort of move was no doubt designed to make Democrats happy. And the most important Democrat in the room was ecstatic, but not for the reason the Republican intended. After the meeting, committee chairman **Paul Sarlo** of Bergen County told me he and his fellow Democrats are salivating over the prospect of using Christie's funding cuts in the race for county executive. The governor who once endorsed Carter's concept of "zero-based budgeting" came up with a new twist for Bergen taxpayers. He zeroed out school aid to 27 districts in the county.

Even ol' Jimmy never managed a trick like that. But imagine if Christie had taken the Reaganite approach urged by Doherty and given the suburbs a bigger share of state aid. Perhaps the court would have nixed the plan. A skillful politician could then pin the blame on the seven justices and rally taxpayers to his side.

Instead, Christie goes into the budget battle with no allies, or at least not in the halls of the Statehouse. He stiffed his fellow Republicans. And as for the Democrats, they got most of the money — and they got a chance to criticize Christie.

Will they also get that big income tax surcharge reinstated? That will be a big test for Governor Carter — oops, I mean Christie.

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