Donald Linky: It is the afternoon of December 13, 2006. My name is Don Linky. We're here for another in the series of interviews for the Brendan T. Byrne Archive of the Rutgers Program on the Governor. Today we'll be talking with Jeffrey Laurenti. Jeffrey played a key role on the legislative staff for the Senate Democrats during the Byrne administration and slightly before the Byrne administration in terms of the key issues of the time, including tax packages and school reform, as well as the new legislation relating to New Jersey Pinelands and the other major legislative programs enacted during the Byrne administration. Jeff, with the benefit of all the time that has passed since you left your role with the State Legislature in Trenton, and the ability to think back about the crises and the issues and the accomplishments of those years in Trenton, what do you recall most?

Jeffrey Laurenti: Well first, one of the things that, looking back, is most stunning about those eight years is the degree to which people involved in the government were able to think and act with a conviction that government could make major changes in the quality of lives for people. Now this is something that post-1981 one has to strain to think of as a normal way of thinking. Post-1981, after the kind of Reagan re-definition of America of the terms of America's political debate, the notion that government could be active and engaged and successful is very hard to re-create, and yet that was a theme that ran through certainly Brendan Byrne's tenure at his office, what he projected, what Democrats leading the legislature, many of them believed, so that is the first and biggest thing to have to come to grips with intellectually in trying to understand how that eight year period was as remarkable as it was, because since then those have not been the terms of reference in which politics have been debated and argued. Second was the degree to which Byrne personally brought a sense of a very high bar, very high standard of integrity and of purpose. You know, dealing on the legislative side as I did, we were always engaged in trade-offs from people's own individual interests, even though there was also, particularly in the years that the legislator with whom I had been most closely associated, Joe Merlino, led the Senate. He certainly brought a big screen, big picture kind of sense of vision too, but by and large politics are politics and you were dealing with individual egos and individual interests and all that, but I think it is fair to say that both before and after you did not have quite such a period of public purpose being the first and often the prime consideration in shaping political decisions. Byrne's willingness to say no and walk away from a deal if the deal required the appointment of a decidedly second rate judge, which had been part of the currency of New Jersey politics before and quickly became part of the politics- currency of politics afterwards, really is one of the things that marks the Byrne years as a real unusual period, and I think that this is something that any subsequent governor would be hard put to be able to recreate.
Donald Linky: How much of that was a product of its time? Brendan Byrne was elected sort of after enduring the Watergate crisis on the federal level. In New Jersey, Governor Cahill had run into problems with key people within his administration and outside, and Brendan Byrne sort of was the right candidate at the right time to take advantage of this situation, and wasn’t it almost easy for him to sort of carve out this reputation for integrity and for a very honest and open government, given that the times were sort of demanding this type of person?

Jeffrey Laurenti: Or alternatively, given that the points of comparison, points of reference were so low, it would be easy to seem high. The answer is no, it wasn’t that easy. Yes, it was easy to be able to run for Governor in 1973 during the Watergate year based on a Gyp DeCarlo quote, “The man who couldn’t be bought” or whatever, but then to actually run a government and deal effectively with the legislature was not going to be easy, given that certain habits of mind are deeply ingrained in political practice. Now, he was also lucky in a sense that he won with such a huge majority, that there was for his first couple years in particular a huge cushion of Democrats who, by traditional standards, didn’t belong in the legislature; they had not been in the legislature for all the years of the traditional habits, having Byrne in, so yes they were more likely to be disposed at least for the first year or so to following the guidance of somebody who would set a higher bar, but it’s very easy to lower the bar afterwards, and Byrne was remarkably successful even when he was-- what was it, 23 percent favorability in polling? Nonetheless, sticking to his guns on thus the basic standards that you’re going to require and expect of politics, so it wasn’t that easy. He was also dealing-- and these are two other factors for the overall picture to remember-- one, with the overhang from at the national level, John Kennedy and the new frontier, and coming into the legislature at that time, coming into Byrne’s own administration for the mid-level positions on down were people whose whole political experience had been shaped as young people by the excitement of the Kennedy years, the notion of government being an engine for progress, the kind of second way from the New Deal, so that was one asset. The second was this growth-- and this is something that would have complicated in any other circumstance-- his dealings with the legislature; a growth of legislative friskiness if you will; the growth of a sense of legislative power; the exercising of the rights that the legislature had. The legislature during Byrne’s first two years and indeed during the Cahill years had tripled its staff allotment, both for personal staff, for non-partisan professional staff, and then for the non-professional partisan staff as well that grew by leaps and bounds in that period, and that was providing a separate and independent capacity, so the legislature at the same time that they governor was coming in with a mandate for raising standards, ethical standards and changing the tone of politics in Trenton, the legislature was becoming newly empowered to block it if it wanted, and ____________ remarkably the legislature was very, very supportive of broad purposes; in some areas pushed the envelope beyond where the governor had thought to go; in other areas exercised some kind of restraints, and of course on the issue of the income tax was exquisitely responsive to the
outcry in some sectors -- many sectors of the electorate -- that we’ve had enough about taxes, and made that into the most protracted and bitter battle and yet in the end, successful.

**Donald Linky**: At the colloquium that we held a few months ago here at the Eagleton Institute, Governor Byrne said that given the choice, he would not run for office today in the current climate. I’d like your sort of reaction to that comment, and also more importantly, do you think somebody like Brendan Byrne could get elected in New Jersey today?

**Jeffrey Laurenti**: Well the big problem in getting elected is that since the 2005 election, the notion of what had been the cornerstone of Byrne’s effort to reshape New Jersey politics, public financing of campaigns, was undercut by a ____________ Jon Corzine and Doug Forrester's decision to walk away from it. That is what makes it very difficult for a candidate like Brendan Byrne to run today. The marketization and the monetarization of our politics, and while New Jersey probably has survived it a bit better than some other states, this process is to basement process of the currency of politics by the inflation of dollar currency into the system. It’s still much worse than it would have been in the ’70s. In the 1970s Brendan Byrne, who would not pick up a phone to call donors, could nonetheless have folks go out and sell him as somebody worth liberals investing money in, and any politician today who does not have a $500 million trust fund somewhere is going to have to spend all his time dialing for dollars and begging money from donors, something that Brendan Byrne hated to do by all accounts, but it’s something now that a candidate for state-wide office is stuck having to do.

**Donald Linky**: But of course, given the recent concerns over the level of corruption in New Jersey and the various convictions and indictments, a candidate sort of in the Brendan Byrne model who is looked at as the man who couldn’t be bought or the squeaky clean type alternative, it probably does have a great deal of attraction to the voter, don’t you think?

**Jeffrey Laurenti**: Well, what’s interesting is that in 2005 at the gubernatorial level, I think it’s fair to say that both political parties came up with somebody who by their distinctive ideologies was “squeaky clean,” that Corzine is the man that can’t be bought because the price tag is to be so high I guess and he doesn’t need it, and Forrester was similarly of that kind of comfortable income level and also great, passionate, moral conviction personally, rectitude. But that could well be the exception, because you look at the others who are running in the Republican primary in 2005; it wasn’t a pretty picture, and on the Democratic side, while Corzine was the only candidate, you only have to go
back one, two gubernatorial election cycles and you are depressed by the kinds of candidates that would emerge and be viewed as the leading candidates.

Donald Linky: Well, we'll talk a little bit more in more detail about sort of the current climate later in the interview, but before we go any further, let's sort of talk about your early upbringing and how you got to your role in Trenton; family, education and so forth.

Jeffrey Laurenti: Well I didn't get to my role in Trenton through family connections. I didn't have to move very far to get to anywhere in Trenton at all because I had grown up there and still live-- talk about a potted plant-- all of about six blocks from where I had grown up. In either case, just two, three blocks from Trenton Central High School. I had done my senior thesis in college on how mayors of three medium sized cities in New Jersey tried to influence legislative outcomes, and among the people that I was interviewing was one legislator who made clear I could come back time and time again, was my own state assemblyman whom I had never met before doing this project, but Joe Merlino, who I think saw an Italian kid from the Italian neighborhood as wow, somebody who was at Harvard, somebody that yeah, wanted to try to steer and over time mentor, and he was terrific mentoring in his quite distinctive way, and so when I got out of college, started graduate school locally at the Woodrow Wilson School. He then lured me away after a semester to work with him as a legislative aide and also with the state Senate minority staff in order to put together the princely sum of $5,000 to pay my salary.

Donald Linky: But backtracking, before you go further, how does an Italian kid from Trenton get to Harvard in the first place?

Jeffrey Laurenti: Well, there's no building named after me. That wasn't the hook.

Donald Linky: Lamont?

Jeffrey Laurenti: Yeah exactly, like Lamont Library and Lamont candidacy and all that. No, I don't know, I guess, you know, if you do plausibly academically and activities and, you know, I was the head of most of the activities I was involved in in high school. Trenton High School at the time was a very interesting and complex society which you appreciate more in the retrospect, particularly when the high school no longer has that mix, a very different mix. In any event, yes.

Donald Linky: What did your mother and father do?

Jeffrey Laurenti: My father was a gym teacher who moonlit as a meat cutter, and my mother had, while she was in the work force, had also been a gym teacher, so this is almost counterintuitive since I've had a lifelong allergy to athletics.
Donald Linky: Did they encourage your academic performance, or was it something that you think you just sort of developed on your own?

Jeffrey Laurenti: Well they didn’t discourage it. I mean, they were pleased by it.

Donald Linky: But they weren’t driving you to it.

Jeffrey Laurenti: No, absolutely not, and my three siblings all appeared in quick succession, all over the lot in terms of academics, so it was a quirk.

Donald Linky: And when you’re deciding to apply to colleges from Trenton High School, what did you think your options were? Did you sort of see the Ivy League and Harvard in particular as something that was reasonable, or was this something of a stretch?

Jeffrey Laurenti: Well, if you had been first in your class year after year, you kind of think that anything might be possible, but the rationale by which I picked ____________, you know, we didn’t have folks in our family who knew college pecking order or, you know, or options very well. It was very much catch as catch can. Harvard, because that’s where John F. Kennedy had gone. He was the first Catholic president. I was ten years old when he ran, and I had seen him in the little motorcade going down East State Street when I was ten, and then Georgetown because I had done a summer debate institute there, and applied to Amherst because a kid who was graduated a year ahead of me had gone there and said “You should apply there,” and I applied to Michigan State University because they were the first college to send me a solicitation, and then to Rutgers because it was a state university and I figured “I ought to be able to get in here,” and that was it, and no clear thinking so it was not as if we were well prepared, but that takes us pretty far field then from--

Donald Linky: How about the finances of tuition and board?

Jeffrey Laurenti: Well Harvard then, Harvard now is among that happy group of institutions that is able to guarantee a kid coming in the means to go through regardless of family means, which is a principle that should be by government a right afforded to all young people, not just those of the richest school.

Donald Linky: Now you mentioned seeing the Kennedy motorcade in Trenton at ten years old. Any other sort of really early episodes which prodded your lifelong interest in public policy and politics and government?
Jeffrey Laurenti: I was a passionate reader from even before age ten of all the political news, at least at the national level, because you would read national news magazines and such, and then it began filtering down. The first state election I remember paying attention to was ’61, Hughes and Jim Mitchell. I was 11 then and, you know, began to be aware of all these other kind of gaps in the political undergrowth you might say during my teenage years ______ legislative freeholders-- totally uninvolved.

Donald Linky: Were your parents politically interested?

Jeffrey Laurenti: Well interested, yes. They were voters who would vote in just about every election.

Donald Linky: But did they see your interest as somewhat strange or peculiar?

Jeffrey Laurenti: They-- no, not that it was strange or peculiar. It was like any kid-- I also was an insect collector, you know, I was eight and ten, so it was kind of in that same strange interest but, you know, you can humor it. It’s not like going gothic or torturing frogs or something.

Donald Linky: What other memories of Harvard in terms of courses, professors, things that you turned you on?

Jeffrey Laurenti: Well, this is going a little far field but the guy that was my senior thesis supervisor was actually one of the emerging conservative thinkers, Edward Banfield, and one particular moment when late in senior year I indicated-- or excuse me, it was the year before, 1970 when there was talk of Pete Williams not running for reelection and Paul Ylvisaker’s name was floated, and I had done an intern in public service job the summer before, and then Commissioner of Community Affairs Paul Ylvisaker had taken a special interest in the internship program, and I mentioned to Banfield that I was thinking of helping out Ylvisaker’s campaign and he blew up. He said “How is it that, after all I’ve been trying to teach you about what would now be considered a very conservative take on urban issues, urban policy, you would think for a second of working for somebody like Ylvisaker?” That’s the first time I had a recognition of this dissonance between the kind of academic environment and study of the realities of urban issues and how-- and where Ylvisaker must therefore have been in the academic debate, and the real world of being at home and what was liberal, what was conservative, what made sense. The other things that I had-- the other big experience, not in terms of courses but in terms of a sense of politics is how differently I found myself on the political spectrum at college as opposed to in Trenton. In Trenton, we were-- I was very liberal, because the key issue
was race. Then, you know, “Do you support blacks, and do you personally associate yourself with blacks’ aspirations and with blacks as individuals and as friends?” and that marked you in “the burg” at the time, Chambersburg as being way off to the left, and I go to Harvard and at that time the key, the issue at Harvard is not race, but the war, and I am still with these scales in my eyes, the blinkered view of, you know, Cold War America and “this is a fight for freedom and democracy for the Vietnamese,” and this and that, and only slowly over those four years did the scales fall from my eyes. So at Harvard I was viewed as conservative, relatively conservative, thus not a participant in the 1969 student strike, retrospectively perhaps with regret, but was in Harvard Young Democrats, but was more sympathetic to Johnson, was quite supportive of Humphrey as opposed to the “Get Clean for Gene McCarthy” campaign which is what swept liberal student opinion on the campuses, and which seemed to me to reflect a social class perspective that was different from what I knew; in other words, not the Democratic base but wealthier, much more affluent families. Of course, that has indeed been one of the fundamental realignment trends since the 1960s in American politics and in northeastern politics; that the blue collar communities that had been the heart of the Democratic party have become estranged to some degree, and we have found a new constituency among the highly educated. Princeton itself in 1960 voted for Nixon over Kennedy. Hard to think about that looking at Princeton’s voting habits since 1972 or even since ’68.

**Donald Linky:** Of course by going to Harvard your opportunities expand significantly in terms of where your next step is in terms of post-college and career. Did you always think you were going to come back to New Jersey and into Trenton?

**Jeffrey Laurenti:** Always.

**Donald Linky:** Why?

**Jeffrey Laurenti:** Well because I had the sense— I still have the sense that— of public service being the most important calling, kind of secular priesthood if you will, and that this town, Trenton needed people to come back to it. I mean, New Jersey doesn’t need people of talent to come back the way Trenton or Camden or whatever does. Actually I have a strong sense of identity with roots with community, so all that never the slightest attraction to moving anywhere else. Fortunately here in New Jersey, one can keep roots and still be able to interact with the entire world, with New York in particular within commuting distance, which is what I ended up doing, now in the kind of international affairs and United Nations arena, but still live in, as we say locally, Trenton.

**Donald Linky:** Of course at the time that you were starting your professional career, there was quite a bit of thought that Washington was really the center of the action and that it was still not a bad thought that the federal government would take initiatives on urban policy and other problems of the time, and no consideration of possibly going to the federal government.
Jeffrey Laurenti: Well, there was indeed consideration of possibly going to the federal
government to do a fair chunk of one's public service career in Trenton, in New Jersey
and then to go to Washington in an elected capacity, and indeed, as you know, I did run
for the Congress in 1986; '84 in the primary and '86.

Donald Linky: But you always saw the first step coming back to New Jersey.

Jeffrey Laurenti: Well that's right, and I remember a conversation with Paul Ylvisaker
during one of these meetings with-- I had a private one-on-one with him after the
internship program in which he said he thought-- because I was offering my view that the
state legislatures were going to be much more significant now going into the 1970s as
places for creative policies as social policy, and Ylvisaker said that the state legislatures
would be the new arena, because they had been totally dead until now, and they are not
over-subscribed either. I mean, I still think that this is a place where young people of
talent should try to at least see if they can make some kind of impact, although I would
now recommend to young people what I had not known to try to do then, which is get in
some Capitol Hill experience during your college years in order to have both a state, local
and a federal, national perspective, and you also discover that that ladder is important for
something that would have been anathema to me in my idealistic youth, a notion of
networking, of actually positively thinking about trying to make acquaintances in a wide
range of areas, which had the notion even existed and been suggested to me then, I
would have said it's outrageous, you do not want to meet people just in order to establish
connections you can use later, but hey that was the quirkiness of a kid that didn't know
anything about the world.

Donald Linky: Talk more about those first meetings with Joe Merlino and what your
take was on him as a personality and as a legislator. He said you could figure out his
take on you.

Jeffrey Laurenti: Well first, he reminded me an awful lot of my own father and uncles
and all that, so this was a classic kind of volatile Italian or Italian American male of a
certain generation, and how should we put it, expressive often in the very earthy way,
direct way. I mean, the first meetings he was a little more careful, a little more formal but
over time you would see even more of the kind of family guy that he was, but also the
mirror image to my own family in many ways. In the first meetings I didn't have the sense
of what his legislative prowess could be, A, because I did not yet have antennae for it but
B, because he was in the minority and this was a minority of 59 to 21. This was the fruits
of the anti-Hughes landslide, if you will, of 1967 and then the '69 gubernatorial election
that just entrenched those Republican—ill-gotten Republican majorities, and so the
Democrats were virtually ornaments in both houses of the legislature at the time. I had--
I learned later that there had been some buzz in the local Democratic circles that I had aligned-- that I had joined up with Merlino and in effect spurned the indirect recruitment of-- and the possibility of working with Dick Coffee, who was then state senator about to step out but still county chairman. But Merlino was simpatico and I have never regretted for a second my working with him because once the Democrats gained majorities and he had taken in hand the role of trying to help Senate candidates around the state in '73. My-- I had a formal role created in the '73 campaign as, kind of, liaison to the Senate campaigns for the Byrne campaign but it was basically still effectively just working with Merlino in particular helping Senate candidates on issues. And then suddenly you're in the majority and a huge majority, 29 to 10 with Tony Imperiale you'll recall as the lone independent and it was going to be a whole new ballgame. I do remember in the lame duck session of 1973, which is famous for two things being done by outgoing Governor Cahill, both with the assent of the incoming governor. One was putting Dick Hughes on the Supreme Court as chief justice and second, getting the legislature to approve full faith and credit pledge to be able to rescue the bonds of the floundering Sports Authority. And of course most of the Democrats in that Senate had been opposed to Cahill's original bill to create the Sports Authority in 1970 and now they were obliged to eat crow as it were and to go out and vote for the pledge of full faith and credit behind the authority bonds because the governor-elect of their party had decided to support it. And what did strike me as a new-- very new kid on the block in a sense was the flexibility with which people could adapt to a change of cues. Then after Byrne's swearing in, the first major event was the rushing through of the legislation to deal with the gasoline crisis because this was the year of the Arab oil embargo and gasoline lines half mile long in places, the famous odd/even-- I guess for subsequent generation totally unknown expedient of odd/even days for being able to buy gasoline based on your license plate number and such. Do you recall that? I-- must recall that.

Donald Linky: I want to stop you though for a moment and backtrack a bit.

Jeffrey Laurenti: Well, let me just finish off this because this is just what the-- finish the sentence that this was the legislature in effect acting for a month in the role of what had been Franklin Roosevelt's 100 days in early 1933, being willing to adopt significant legislation, whooshing it through, scarcely read. This was very quickly brought to a halt and folks began asserting a new legislative responsibility to read bills and decide on them by the second month. Not out of any antagonism to the governor, but a sense that this is what our job as legislators is supposed to be.

Donald Linky: Before Brendan Byrne gets elected and takes office, talk about the politics. You were working for a Mercer County organization. Dick Coffee initially was a candidate in that election. What were the politics? Did you understand it at that time?
Did you get up to speed as to who the players were and what Coffee was trying to do and who the other alliances for other candidates were backing?

Jeffrey Laurenti: Well, right. I mean, this was-- I was quote "in the game now" for all of a year and then in a legislative aide's capacity, but it was-- Dick Coffee was looking to find alliances with some of the major Democratic organizations in Northern New Jersey in order to give himself the kind of springboard. He had lined up a consultant firm, so this was already a sign of new politics. I think it was John Marttila, and he was trying to carve out a niche in a field that basically was Ralph DeRose and Anne Klein, so he was trying position himself as a Dick Hughes tradition center of the Democratic party and once Brendan-- and then we heard of this Brendan Byrne coming in and, of course, in Mercer County, Brendan Byrne was not a household name. It was an Essex County name, and once his candidacy began to pick up steam, then that political space that Coffee was looking to occupy was not viable. So Coffee cut his deal and withdrew in favor of Byrne, seeing that Byrne had already put together the crucial pieces in Northern New Jersey where Coffee had had to find support if he was going to make it.

Donald Linky: How involved was Joe Merlino and, I guess, how involved were you in the early Coffee campaign?

Jeffrey Laurenti: Well, not deeply because-- I don't know about Joe. I hadn't heard of any activities that he was being called on to do in terms of trying to open doors for Dick Coffee and certainly we were just a bit at that point ready to do whatever, as you got close to the primary, it might have been called upon, but I was not in any way engaged in the inside. So fast disappearance of a Coffee machine.

Donald Linky: Well, some of the Coffee machine lasted for a long time after the--

Jeffrey Laurenti: Well, right, but not the gubernatorial, I mean the campaign machinery.

Donald Linky: Did you have any contact with Dick Leone and Lew Kaden at the time, who initially were aligned with the Coffee campaign?

Jeffrey Laurenti: Not in that context. Now, Dick I had met in the early days of the Muskie campaign and Dick Leone had evidently gotten Coffee's blessing to take his seat in the state Senate in 1971. Coffee gave up the seat after what had been the old arrangement of county-based Senate districts was invalidated by a new redistricting map that had to split Mercer, so he found himself now in a district given where he lived in Mercer that was basically 100 in county plus suburban Mercer and the other Senate district-- legislative district was Trenton-Hamilton, so Coffee figured it wasn't worth running, but this guy Dick Leone wants to run, I'll support him. I'll give him the nomination and then a guy named Bob Cline goes and works the committee people and lines up the votes under our convention process to be able to win the nomination. So
Dick Leone walks away. This we hear third hand. I've never talked about this ever with Dick Leone. And into '73 I-- early '73 I haven't seen much of Dick Leone for at least a year, year and a half.

**Donald Linky:** Now, when Brendan Byrne enters the race late in the primary season, you said that Dick Coffee felt his own campaign was undermined. Did you believe personally that Brendan Byrne was a sure winner in the primary?

**Jeffrey Laurenti:** Well, no. I very much remember the Anne Klein quote after meeting with Byrne that he's a boob or something to that effect. And he was a stumbling candidate in the-- that is what I remember from that-- the primary skirmishing.

**Donald Linky:** We've heard the word “terrible” used a few times.

**Jeffrey Laurenti:** Well, right, by those closer to him they undoubtedly. So there-- this was the triumph of New Jersey's organizational politics. He had the line in Hudson. He-- but also you have the beginning of the shift to the new politics as well. You have Anne Klein barking from the, kind of, wealthy suburban liberal constituencies that forced the race into an issue discussion as well, and Byrne had to be able to position himself successfully there. But Byrne seemed to be the likely nominee precisely because he was occupying the right space, the center of the Democratic party. There's a center-left piece of the political spectrum, and that plus the traditional organizational advantages of Hudson and Mercer where he got the line, made it pretty clear he would be the nominee barring a giant upset.

**Donald Linky:** And what was your role after Coffee left and Byrne got in the campaign? Did you talk to Joe Merlino as to politically what he and you should do at this point?

**Jeffrey Laurenti:** No. We now had our candidate and our candidate was Byrne, so we would do in the primary in Mercer County what had to be done, whatever the-- and I don't remember what we did as a campaign in Mercer in that primary, but it was essentially the traditional-- the grass roots door-to-door to Democrats by phoning and at folks' doorsteps to deliver your loyal Democratic organization voter to the polls for this guy Byrne.

**Donald Linky:** But it was essentially the decision that since the Mercer organization had come to back Byrne, that was your responsibility to implement that endorsement as opposed to trying to work more directly with the Byrne campaign as an individual.
Jeffrey Laurenti: Right. That never occurred to me and I didn't do it. I-- because again, that supposes that you have an-- some intent of wanting to get involved in the gubernatorial campaign close to the candidate in some way, and I enjoyed what I was doing and was able to do my bit for the campaign at a-- in our little area of supposed expertise.

Donald Linky: What do you remember about Joe Merlino's take on Brendan Byrne as a candidate in '73?

Jeffrey Laurenti: That he was a candidate, shaking his head at him and yet having found him a decent enough guy, and he was going to win, particularly once he got into the general election with Sandman. Clearly he was going to win, and not much more than that. I do recall our having had an exchange after Byrne had said-- I guess it was down at the shore -- he saw no need for an income tax in the foreseeable future and that this was a major story in all the state’s paper and The New York Times as well. Why the hell did he say that, because Merlino had been one of the relatively small number of Democrats in the state Senate who, in 1972 with Cahill’s plan, had publicly supported the tax plan when virtually all the other Senate Democrats were waiting to see if it would even come over from the Assembly. Why put yourself out in any way on it, and so we were pretty strongly committed to an income tax-based tax reform, and it seems as if this was either a pledge that was going to eviscerate what we expected a Democratic governor needed to do or would somehow otherwise just keep us tied up in knots. So that was from our outside of the camp-- the gubernatorial campaign staff's perspective puzzling and incomprehensible.

Donald Linky: Do you think Joe Merlino thought that, also?

Jeffrey Laurenti: Well, that was the nature of our conversation, what is this about? And you’d try to parse with a micro-- or magnifying glass, “What exactly did he say?” And even then it didn’t make sense because the margin looked as if-- it looked as if Sam Adams could not ride that issue into victory. So why-- if you’re able to stay silent till now, why not stay silent just a couple more weeks or whatever?

Donald Linky: We conducted an interview with Frank McDermott, who was Congressman Sandman’s campaign manager, and we asked him if Brendan Byrne had come out forthrightly for an income tax in that campaign whether he thought he would lose, and he said he thought he would. You disagree I assume?
Jeffrey Laurenti: Well, I mean, clearly conservative Republicans in this state have long- - had long imagined income tax to be an issue on which elections would turn. I think the fact that after having achieved an enactment of the income tax in a far more politically difficult climate, 1976, '77 than 1973 had been that he won by 58% is a sign that they had been consistently wrong in reading that tax-- the salience of the income tax issue.

Donald Linky: Now that Brendan Byrne is in office and we, sort of, started to do-- deal with this a little bit, and you have this great shift in the legislature in terms of the partisan makeup and composition, you said that it was, sort of, a shock in terms of this turnover but it also probably created problems in the sense you had a lot of new people in the legislature and you also such supermajorities that it must have been difficult to keep discipline within the party. Is that true?

Jeffrey Laurenti: Well, the supermajorities made it hard to have 66 votes on every issue in the Assembly, and first you have-- there’s a big difference between the Assembly and the Senate because the Senate got people who were already to some degree professional politicians. Virtually anybody to get a nomination there with a couple exceptions I think of Herb Buehler from the shorefront district in Monmouth County, whom nobody expected to win, although we had confidence that he could do it in a landslide year. And so he could be and was totally without traditional party discipline, but most of the guys run for the Senate. If they weren’t already graduating from the Assembly, and there were few of those in the class of ’73 had not been active, nonetheless been engaged in politics at a local level to get the Senate nomination. In the Assembly you had a much larger number of people whose first venture into elective politics now was running for the Assembly in a hopeless Republican district and being absorbed into the legislature in spite of yourself by the breadth of the Byrne sweep, the landslide, and the revulsion against-- frankly against Nixon. We had written-- I had written for Joe a press release a week or so before the election that in effect foretold on the assumption that Byrne was going to win by the margins we set-- had set and really said among other things, “This election shows that the American voters are going to punish the Republican party until it dumps Richard Nixon,” quote/unquote pretty much, which got picked up by Associated Press, by papers around the country, because this was seen as the harbinger of a Republican debacle of unprecedented proportions in the year ahead. And I think that that sense that we are on the cusp of a major transformation in the national picture as well also helped encourage Democrats in the new legislature to be wanting to be on the front lines of defining what can be American politics, and Byrne certainly positioned himself and them in that role with this Roosevelt-style 100 days flood of legislative initiatives in the first six months. And we put-- we did stall a bit or put some limits on this new idea of a public advocate, which it seemed to us went flying through the Assembly. On the Senate side, this seemed to us perhaps to evoke precisely the kind of liberal engine-- social engineering that our traditional blue collar base was uncomfortable with, looking back at the McGovern election. So we put some of the more visionary
aspects of that on a bit of a four year leash in terms of a four year trial authorization and Stanley Van Ness was quite upset at our backward thinking on this, and then three years later Merlino was the one who sponsored the legislation to drop the expiration date. But by and large, the public advocate fell in with public financing on gubernatorial campaigns and the other major initiatives of the voter registration by mail, although we already had had a bill in. We had to dicker with Bob Raymar and others on coming up with the administration’s proposed tax. But you had the surge of reform legislation that sought to take advantage of these new opportunities to position New Jersey on the front lines. It became very quickly forgotten that in those first six months, there was a good deal of talk of Byrne being positioned for the national ticket in 1976 because of this record that was being compiled, this ocean liner that was steaming ever faster out of port till it hit the iceberg of the income tax.

Donald Linky: During the transition after the election, as the Byrne people, sort of, developed their own legislative program, do you feel there was enough dialogue between the legislature and the leadership in particular and the new Byrne people in terms of shaping that?

Jeffrey Laurenti: No, there was very little dialogue. The fact that the incoming governor had picked a-- well, for a couple of months state senator but she remained on the staff in the 1972, ’73 Senate as minority counsel to Senate Democrats Jerry Fitzgerald-English as his legislative counsel. At the beginning was not seen as having a substantive impact because the real brain trust was in Lew Kaden’s shop and the remarkable collection of talents that he assembled in counsel’s office and of course with Dick Leone, neither of whom was seen on the legislative side as reaching to include legislative input in the shaping of administration bills. And so there was the sense at the outset that the administration was coming up with bills handing them to the majority leaders in the two houses to find sponsors for and expecting them to deliver these. Again, that’s a classic Roosevelt 100 days syndrome, and Merlino on the Senate side in particular wasn’t going to cotton to it for very long although ideologically he was in exactly the same place, if not maybe even a couple millimeters to the left on some of these issues. But the legislature had its own integrity. I think we’re going to have to pursue this in the second taping because there are interesting issues in this that we had begun to surface in the colloquially infamous (from our point of view) Burstein constitutional amendment on delivery of bills all springs from this issue.

Donald Linky: Why don’t we break now and resume at another time?

Jeffrey Laurenti: All right. Let’s do that.

### End of Laurenti 12-13-06 audio.mp3 ###