

Governor Thomas H. Kean Interview (May 2, 2011)

Michael Aron: It's the afternoon of May second, 2011, we're in Far Hills, at the office of former Governor Kean. We're here for the Center on the American Governor, for the Thomas H. Kean archive. I'm Michael Aron of NJN News. We've had a number of conversations with Governor Kean about his start in politics, his forming of a government in 1982-- '81 and '82, about his governorship, and we're going to try to wrap things up today by taking a look mainly at the governor's sense of his own legacy and the work he's been doing since he left the governorship in 1990. Thanks for coming back into this series with us.

Governor Thomas Kean: Thank you for coming back into it.

Michael Aron: My pleasure, I learn from this. By coincidence, we scheduled this the day after the death of Osama Bin Laden and 9-11 Commission has been-- at least it's what you're associated with the most nowadays. Is it still an important part of your life, the 9-11 Commission?

Governor Thomas Kean: Yes, because the follow up work is involved. I'm still doing that and I'm still working with my partner, Lee Hamilton, so we've got a bipartisan group who is looking at areas involved with terrorism and Islamic terrorism and trying to make recommendations to keep the country safer and follow up on the recommendations of the 9-11 Commission which still haven't been carried out. And in that process, we're talking with all the players on the Obama team and trying to help them in any way we can, but also if we think something's wrong, we're going to hold their feet to the fire.

Michael Aron: And we did a separate interview moments ago for the archive, about the death of Bin Laden, but just to summarize for the sake of someone who might not see that interview, you feel that removing him is of great symbolic importance, but that it doesn't mean it's time to relax in what you call the war on Islamic fundamentalism or Islamic terror, is that correct?

Governor Thomas Kean: That's correct. I just-- it's a time to take a moment and celebrate, and for the families, particularly, to feel that some closure is here. But nobody else has been removed. We've still got people out here who want to kill civilians, particularly in the United States, but also in other countries as well. They're using new methodologies, they're operating from new places, they're going to be at us of all to come, and we've got to not relax. I mean, we've got to get

ahead of them. We've got to look at what they might do and see if we can prevent it, and then we've got to root them out, and we won't be safe until we've rooted out all of them.

Michael Aron: Well a longer section of your thoughts on this is on a separate page in this website. Let's get back to your governorship and your post governorship period. Do you miss being governor?

Governor Thomas Kean: No.

Michael Aron: Why not?

Governor Thomas Kean: Because it was a wonderful, wonderful part of my life, it was a wonderful job, but I think eight years is enough for anybody. I mean, I-- not every state has a two term limitation, and my friends in other states who are governors, who served, sometimes for 12 years, sometimes for even longer, with one exception, always regretted it.

Michael Aron: Who's the exception?

Governor Thomas Kean: The exception is the governor of North Carolina, Jim Hunt. Jim Hunt served for 16 years, if you can believe it, and he thought it took him that long to really do what he-- he was the best education governor in the country, and he thought it took that long for him to do to the schools and colleges in that state, what really needed to be done, and there's some evidence of that. I mean, if you look at North Carolina now, everything from their test scores to their advances in higher education, are really leading the country in many ways, and that's a tribute to Jim Hunt. But with that exception, almost everybody else told me that extra four years or eight years was a mistake, and they just didn't have the joy in it. You know, by the time you start doing your ninth or tenth budget, by the time you're doing your ninth and tenth march in the Columbus Day Parade, or what have you, the freshness goes and some of the excitement and some of the energy. And plus, with a number of these cases, some of their popularity left at the same time, so they didn't have a great experience. So I thought that eight years was plenty.

Michael Aron: Was it a burn out job or did you learn how to manage your time, over time, and physically and emotionally you could have continued on?

Governor Thomas Kean: Oh, I could have continued, but-- and you know, I would almost have been forced to if it hadn't been for limitation, because you know, what happens to you is that people depend on you. First you've got a whole bunch of people in your administration who want you to stay, because that means they can stay, and they like it, and they're doing things that are important and they want to complete those-- that job. Secondly you've got policies you care about. I mean, there were some things that I would have liked to continue on, I didn't get finished.

Michael Aron: Such as?

Governor Thomas Kean: Well, there was things in education reform. I really had a bunch of things moving, that got stopped when I left office and actually were eliminated, that if they continued, I think would have made our schools and colleges better. Environmental protection, I still had a big effort to do some more things to preserve some of the shoreline of New Jersey, and I think I could have gotten that through in another year or so. A bunch of things like that. I would have liked to continue what I was doing for the arts community, because they needed that stability of a stable source of funding, and I could have accomplished that, and a number of things that I think I wanted to do that I could have done. And a third thing is that, for whatever reason, I was extremely popular when I left office, so I had a popularity rate running above 70 percent the day I left office, so the political pressure on me to run for office for the Republican Party would have been very, very difficult to resist. So for all those reasons, I think I probably would have been forced into a third term. I didn't want it, and it was enough. Two terms, I think is enough for any governor.

Michael Aron: You're reminding me that when you did have to step aside, that, I think it was five significant Republicans in the state, many of whom had close connections to you, all sought the nomination in 1989. Jim Courter, Chuck Hardwick, Bill Gormley—

Governor Thomas Kean: Cary Edwards.

Michael Aron: Cary Edwards, your Attorney General. And one other who's escaping me at the moment. But was that a tough thing for you to navigate?

Governor Thomas Kean: It wasn't tough, and maybe it should have been, because you know, when I ran for governor, I wasn't the party's choice. I had, something like three county chairmen out of 17 who endorsed me, and I really had

to beat the party to become governor. So I always thought that one shouldn't dictate who was the nominee in primaries, that it's much better to let the primary take its place, because if somebody dictated it, I never would have been governor. So for that reason I always thought that I should let the people decide. And I've questioned that since.

Michael Aron: In hindsight is there someone you think you should have--

Governor Thomas Kean: Well in hindsight, you know, a couple of tough choices. When running against Frank Lautenberg at one point, we had Pete Dawkins. The other fellow that wanted it was Lenny Coleman, who was much closer to me. And I felt very badly, because I obviously voted for Lenny, and if I had a different philosophy, probably would have supported him and then he might have beaten Dawkins in a primary and maybe Dawkins would have dropped out if I'd been supporting Lenny. So-- and certainly in that primary, I had a number of good friends. I never stopped to analyze who would be the better candidate. Jim Courter was a wonderful, wonderful human being, but he had no state experience, and he made some mistakes in the campaign that a Cary Edwards probably wouldn't have made, or some of the others probably wouldn't have made. And so I've second guessed myself a bit, maybe at some point I should have said, no, no, this is the best candidate and that's who I ought to support, but I just-- my own experience said, leave it to the people, let the party voters decide who the candidate is, and don't interfere with that process.

Michael Aron: From a press perspective, Courter did make some mistakes. In July of that year, he got caught up in a controversy about homosexuality and school teachers and in the middle of a press conference on State Street, he walked away from the press, and we all put it on the news that he had left us in the lurch.

Governor Thomas Kean: Yeah. Never ever do that.

Michael Aron: From the vantage point of a governor, would your legacy have been better served, had a Republican followed you, than a Democrat, or doesn't matter?

Governor Thomas Kean: Republican or Democrat, it would have been better served if somebody had been elected who followed some of my policies. I think Jim Florio, who I like-- now, very much, we have-- at one point, we were quite political rivals, but Jim, I thought, felt at the time he had to do an abrupt face, and go a different direction in a number of areas, and so I think somebody who would go in

the same direction, didn't have to be a Republican, could have been a Democrat. I mean, Brendan Byrne and I were more or less in the same path for 16 years. Some differences, but a lot more similarities. So we could have-- you know, somebody who had followed more of my path, I think would have been better for the legacy.

Michael Aron: Governors seem like they need to put their own imprint on things so quickly. One will create an Office of the Comptroller, so the next one creates an Inspector General, and deemphasizes the comptroller and so on. Why is that?

Governor Thomas Kean: I think somebody, governors are often advised that this is absolutely essential for policy. It usually isn't. Also governors, since I was elected, have been short term. I was the last governor to serve eight years. And that was a long time ago.

Michael Aron: Christie Whitman was reelected, but she didn't serve the full second term.

Governor Thomas Kean: No, she left. She left, and so we had these half governors and--

Michael Aron: Half governors, that's an interesting--

Governor Thomas Kean: Whatever, I mean, governors who served half their terms or less in some cases. And that's difficult for the state. The state needs some continuity, the state needs continuity of policy and leadership and personnel, and for years that was just disrupted by governors going in and out the door. And that hurt New Jersey more than people recognize, I think. It wasn't that they weren't all good people, they were fine people, but government needs stability, it needs-- I could not have done what I did in four years. It needed to follow through to eight years.

Michael Aron: I wonder if Chris Christie agrees with you?

Governor Thomas Kean: I don't know, I really don't know, but I just don't think you can-- you can't permanentize things, certainly, in four years. You can do a lot, but your successor-- I mean, I think that's one of the reasons Mayor Bloomberg ran for another term, because he had done a lot of very good things in education, and he didn't see those lasting unless he had one more term to put them in place.

Michael Aron: And now in his third term, his education-- at least his appointment has blown up in his face.

Governor Thomas Kean: Yeah, that-- he had a bad problem with that appointment, but it's-- nevertheless, his reforms and the new, New York schools that will last. I'm not sure they wouldn't have been able to overturn them if he hadn't run for reelection.

Michael Aron: You went off to Drew, and we believe that, in our last interview, we talked to you about being recruited by Finn Caspersen and his wife, I believe.

Governor Thomas Kean: Yeah, Barbara, yeah.

Michael Aron: Barbara. One of them was Chairman of the Board of Trustees at Drew--

Governor Thomas Kean: No, no, just on the board.

Michael Aron: On the board, okay. How long were you at Drew?

Governor Thomas Kean: Longer than I've been at any other job. I was there 15 years.

Michael Aron: Really?

Governor Thomas Kean: I've never done-- that's an old college president. Most college presidents don't serve anywhere close to that length.

Michael Aron: And how do you look back on those 15 years?

Governor Thomas Kean: I loved the kids, I mean, you know, I started off as a school teacher. The kids I first taught are now having their 50th reunion, and they wrote on their blogs that they remember me as a teacher and what I did for them, which was the most flattering thing ever been said about me, and I wonder sometimes if I made the wrong choice, if I could make that kind of an impact on kids 50 years ago, so they remember 50 years later. And so I've always loved

working with kids, and that was my biggest enjoyment at Drew. When, yeah, you did all the other presidential things with the faculty and you raised money, and you did all that, but the teaching, the mentoring, the ability to change a liberal arts organization in ways which I think were more beneficial to actual kids, was what I really enjoyed.

Michael Aron: To what extent do you think you raised the profile of Drew?

Governor Thomas Kean: I hope I raised it, I tried. I mean, I tried to change the way people did things at that institution. I built buildings, I didn't-- When I came there the gym was like a high school gym. I built an auditorium so we could have speakers and brought in everybody. Brought in both Clintons, every Bush in town, and a bunch of other people, Colin Powell--

Michael Aron: In fact, you launched, like, a major speaker series at Drew.

Governor Thomas Kean: Yes, and then got it endowed, so it's still going. Yeah, and that was-- changed the way that Drew looked at the arts, because I thought that was very important for a small liberal arts college. Now they've got a-- well actually, for a small liberal arts college, they've got the number one theater program in the country now, so ranked.

Michael Aron: Really?

Governor Thomas Kean: Yeah. And good music, and good arts.

Michael Aron: That gym that you built is where some of these high profile speakers spoke. I remember seeing Colin Powell speak there, and who else did you-- Cheney?

Governor Thomas Kean: We had Bill Clinton, Hilary Clinton--

Michael Aron: Bill Clinton--

Governor Thomas Kean: Dick Cheney, George Bush Senior, George Bush Junior, Barbara Bush, Jeb Bush, and we had--

Michael Aron: Looks like your Republican connections came in handy, although I guess if you had the Clintons, that's--

Governor Thomas Kean: Al Gore, these are all friends of mine. I mean, I was in politics at a time when my friends were Democrats as well as Republicans.

Michael Aron: I'm looking at a picture behind you of you and Bill Clinton as young governors. You were both sort of education governors in the '80s.

Governor Thomas Kean: Yeah, we worked very well together and the other one is Mike Dukakis, and we would exchange ideas and if Bill had a good program, or Mike had a good program, they'd often call me and say, "Have you tried this?" I took things from Jim Hunt, another Democrat in North Carolina, and they took things from me. And I remember Mike calling me one day, Mike Dukakis, and saying, "What about this transportation trust fund," because it was the first in this country, in the country, to do that kind of thing to transportation. He said, "I think-- could you tell me about it?" So I said, "I'll not only tell you about it, I'll send you all the materials, and here's the guy who's running it now, and talk to him." So he did all that, and he called me up and he said, "You know, I love it."

Michael Aron: Who was running it, do you recall?

Governor Thomas Kean: Well John Sheridan [ph?] was head of the department. I don't know if he was the one I told Mike to talk to, but-- and so Mike calls me back and says, "You know, I love it, we want to do it here. Would you have any objection if I called it a Dukakis program?" And of course I didn't, because that's how governors work together. Of course, I was in-- and I took the Governor Schools from Jim Hunt in North Carolina. Bill Clinton and I exchanged a number of ideas and programs, and that's how it should work, because governors aren't rivals of one another. Governors should be taking the best of what's going on in the other states, which are really laboratories, and bringing that to their state, and I was head of the Republican governors, I was on the executive committee of the Republican Governors Association, or rather of the National Governors Association, and I was friendly with all the top governors in my time, so I was very-- it was very easy for me to find out good programs in almost every other area, and either bring them in myself, or put my cabinet officials in contact with those governors so that they could bring them to New Jersey.

Michael Aron: So the National Governors Association facilitates idea sharing in an effective way, would you say?

Governor Thomas Kean: It used to. People tell me it's a little more partisan now. I hope not too partisan, because that's not-- governors shouldn't be. The reason governors are so effective and the reason, when it comes to choosing a president, I usually look at a governor, is because it's different than a Senator. You don't just vote, and you have to do something, and you're judged on what you do as a governor, you're not judged on how you look or how you vote, or whether you're conservative or a liberal, you're judged on how much you can do for your state, and that's a big difference. And as governors, you know, we share those ideas, because we all want to succeed. And we had _____ with change, I think. We were such good friends that we had a sort of a prohibition. I mean, I would never ever go into campaign in a state where a fellow governor was. So I would never campaign for the Republican candidate in a state where a Democrat was governor, if he was an incumbent governor. And nobody ever came into New Jersey against me in any way. And even if they wanted to come in, they'd often call me and say, hey, we're coming in to do a Democratic fundraiser, not against me, but is that all right? And I'd say, of course, of course, and how can I help you out? And that was the way we operated, and that's the way you should operate. I mean, you can disagree as much as you want on some ideas, but you can help each other, and you should be friends.

Michael Aron: What have your other major commitments been, Robert Wood Johnson, Carnegie, talk about what else you've been involved with since leaving the governorship.

Governor Thomas Kean: Well it's really-- It's a follow on to the governorship a lot of them. I've been now-- Bill Clinton asked me to take on the chairmanship of something to do-- an organization to do something about teen pregnancy. And I was enormously busy, Drew, and--

Michael Aron: He was president at the time?

Governor Thomas Kean: Yeah, and he said, I don't want to do it in government, because it will get into politics, and it's a sensitive issue anyway, so we want you to do it from outside of politics. I said I'd do it for one year. I'm still doing it.

Michael Aron: How long has that--

Governor Thomas Kean: Thirteen years, I think, because the organization has been so good, not because of me, but because of the people who are running it, that we've now been picked, I think by the Harvard Business School, as the model to set up to deal with an issue, of a nonprofit that's set up to deal with an issue.

Michael Aron: What's the name of the organization?

Governor Thomas Kean: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. Although we've changed it a little bit now, because one of the foundations has given us, I think, 20 million dollars now, because there's some evidence that, well we've gotten-- the teen pregnancy rate is down, in part because of our efforts, but a number of other things, that women between 20 and 30, there's a spike going up in there. Because we've been so successful in teen pregnancy, they want us to find out why that is and what we can do to address that problem, and so working on that now, as well as teen pregnancy. But it's been a-- not because of me, it's just been a wonderful organization with a good board and people who are really committed to the subject, and working with everything from Hollywood to religious leaders to try to make an impact, and it's made an impact.

Michael Aron: Yeah, you don't hear about teen pregnancy much anymore.

Governor Thomas Kean: It's gone down. I mean, you know, we had a goal to reduce it over ten years by a third, and we did. Other people were involved, too, but we were part of it, and now we want to stop it from-- we want to keep it there and drive it down even further, because we've still got more teen pregnancies than any other industrial country in the world. And you know, we've got to stop it, and the best thing I was able to do, I think, is, when I started in the field, it was very polarized, and those who said, you know, it's got to be done by abstinence, and those who said it's got to be done by contraception, they were like this. And then the antiabortion people were worried that we were into Planned Parenthood and abortions were going to be part of the thing. And I was able to convince them that what we were doing was preventing abortions, because if you prevent a teen from becoming pregnant, then there's no abortion. And so we were able to unify the whole field so that both sides now recognize that it is-- sometimes it's abstinence, sometimes it's contraception whatever method, what we really want to do is stop teenagers from becoming pregnant and that everybody should be allied with that cause together. Anyway, that's one of the things.

Michael Aron: All right, what else?

Governor Thomas Kean: Oh, I've been involved in a number of things that have been out for a while-- I'm always involved with the city of Newark, one way or another, all my life. I mean, that's--

Michael Aron: What are you involved in now?

Governor Thomas Kean: Oh, everything, the water PAC, I was chairman for a while. We had a Newark Urban Coalition, I've been-- talk to my secretary, she'll find out the number of nonprofit boards that I've been very involved with.

Michael Aron: Newark Alliance?

Governor Thomas Kean: I've been involved with-- yeah, learning disability. When I was a child, I was dyslexic and had a bad stutter, and so I've always been interested, and I didn't get involved in that, and for a while, I was ashamed to admit that I had the problem.

Michael Aron: We did an interview, you and me, in 1986, after your reelection, at which you revealed--

Governor Thomas Kean: That was the first time, yeah.

Michael Aron: Publically hat you had been a stutterer as a child.

Governor Thomas Kean: That was the first time. I used to be embarrassed by it, and then I figured, maybe it helps other people if I talk about it, so I've been somewhat involved with a national organization which is trying to help kids who have learning disabilities of one kind or another, so we can help them get through school and have a successful life. There are a number and number of dyslexic people who have been enormously successful in this life. And showing that to kids who have the problem, and showing them that they can succeed is a big part of the solution.

Michael Aron: Did you see the film, "The King's Speech?"

Governor Thomas Kean: Oh yes.

Michael Aron: Did you like it?

Governor Thomas Kean: I liked it, and I identified with it. I mean, there is nothing worse, and he-- that actor portrayed it so well, there's nothing worse than being in public and having to say something and not be able to get it out. I did it as a child, but I remember how embarrassing it was in class, to have the teacher call on you and know the answer, and open your mouth and go like this, and nothing comes out. And you start to sweat, and the other kids at that age will sort of laugh at you, and so I developed a way of saying, I don't know the answer. And the teacher would call me, I don't know the answer, because I was-- would much rather be thought of as dumb, than not being able to get that answer out. So anyway, "The King's Speech" was, yes.

Michael Aron: Are you the chairman of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation?

Governor Thomas Kean: Yes, I am.

Michael Aron: How long have you been that?

Governor Thomas Kean: I've been chairman, oh I guess about eight or nine years. I've been on the board since '91, my term will be up in another couple of years, and it's a wonderful foundation, it does a lot for the health and healthcare of this country, and it did a--signature programs with the substance abuse program, a lot of the anti-tobacco stuff was us, we're the leading proponents now or the efforts against childhood obesity, and now we've got a major campaign going which includes, thank goodness, the First Lady, trying to take on that as an issue, because it's the biggest health issue we have in this country, the kind of diabetes that is going to appear if we don't track that issue, will be something the country just cannot afford, cannot afford because of the people we'll lose, cannot afford medically either. It's a worse problem than substance abuse, right now for the future.

Michael Aron: So you think it's a good thing that Michelle Obama has embraced it as her cause?

Governor Thomas Kean: Yeah, I just-- I think she's wonderful to do it, and because she's right. I mean, and it's a bipartisan issue. I mean, the first guy in the country to tackle it was Mike Huckabee. And he tackled it in a poor southern state, and he was the first one to take on the soft drink companies and say, Pepsi and

Coca-Cola should not be in our schools, got them out of the schools. He was the first one to set limits in schools, so that you should have some exercise and he stopped cold that epidemic in his state.

Michael Aron: He also lost about 100 pounds himself.

Governor Thomas Kean: Yes he did, as an example, and no, and I've always had an admiration for him ever since, but he-- so it's been bipartisan, and, but I've admired people in both parties who have taken it on, because there's nothing more important.

Michael Aron: Do you have a connection with the Carnegie Endowment or Carnegie Foundation?

Governor Thomas Kean: Carnegie Foundation, I'm chairman.

Michael Aron: Chairman of that as well.

Governor Thomas Kean: Yes, and that carries on a lot of my long term loves. I mean, that's one of the largest education reform organizations. We fund a lot of education reform around the country, it is one of the largest foundations on world peace, we fund, for instance, the antinuclear efforts of Sam Nunn and those people who are trying to contain the nuclear threat around the world. We fund conversations behind the scenes, so that people in countries who don't get along publicly, can have some private conversations which start things off. We funded, for instance, the Russian American talks before Glasnost, to get those started.

Michael Aron: There's the Carnegie Foundation and then there's the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Governor Thomas Kean: Yes, and we work together. Andrew Carnegie was an amazing individual. You know he gave away every cent. He believed that if you were rich, you were a sinner if you died with any of that money. And he said the greatest sin was to die rich. And so his kids got nothing. Nothing, not a cent. And he didn't even give them things during his lifetime. He thought everybody should do their own thing. But he founded things all over the world. The Haig is all his, you know, the Court for International Peace, he's got endowments in Great Britain and Scotland and France, he's got an endowment in Japan, he's got three organizations

in this country, plus Carnegie Hall and all the libraries, but he's got our organization, the largest, which is Carnegie Foundation, and then he's got the one for peace, international peace, and one for education in California. So he's a remarkable, remarkable man.

Michael Aron: You serve in another capacity, which is as an ex-governor. There's a whole life as an ex-governor from New Jersey.

Governor Thomas Kean: Yes.

Michael Aron: You and Brendan Byrne are often at functions, the same functions, I would imagine, yes?

Governor Thomas Kean: Very often, yeah.

Michael Aron: And other ex-governors as well?

Governor Thomas Kean: Yeah.

Michael Aron: Some are more active than others. You don't see Christie Whitman at too many of these functions. Do you enjoy that aspect of being an ex-governor or is it sort of demanding?

Governor Thomas Kean: Well I do when you can be useful. I mean, I don't like these organizations, frankly, to say we're trying to get all five governors here, ex-governor, seven, or however many there are of us now. I think that's sort of useless, and I don't sometimes if it's an organization I really love and think is a organization, I may go, otherwise I won't. But sometimes you can be a real help to an organization. You can help them raise funds. I do a lot of fundraising for charities in the state, who, for some reason think honoring me is going to raise them some money. The Newark Museum is about to do it in their fundraiser this year.

Michael Aron: The Newark Museum?

Governor Thomas Kean: Yeah. And I've done it for a number of organizations in the past. I do the George Street Playhouse every year, I just got finished doing that.

Michael Aron: Last night?

Governor Thomas Kean: Last night, yes. And so I do a number of those kind of functions, particularly for small arts organizations, because everything we can do to keep them in business, I think is important to the state right now, because the state, for one reason or another, is incapable right now of funding them to the way they should.

Michael Aron: You do some media work with Brendan Byrne, in the Star Ledger and on NJN?

Governor Thomas Kean: Well, you know, I think that's a good thing for the state. We are in such a difficult period in this country, and the politics have become so nasty, and because of that, people aren't getting anything done, and I think, to be able to see that Brendan Byrne was the Democratic Governor, I was the Republican Leader in the Assembly, during his governorship most of the time, and that, in that process, we became friends, even though we disagreed on a number of issues publicly. I think that's good for people to see, and I think that's good for people to see that you can disagree without being, as I say, disagreeable, and we still disagree on a number of issues, but we still have been, since that time, close friends. And the two governors, funnily enough, who helped me out most, when I was governor, were Brendan Byrne and Dick Hughes.

Michael Aron: Two Democrats.

Governor Thomas Kean: Yeah. Dick Hughes was enormously helpful with advice and help and everything else, all the time, and so was Brendan. I mean, Brendan and I used to play tennis about every other week, then after tennis we'd sit down for an hour and I'd say, "I'm having trouble with Alan Karcher, tell me how to deal with him, I'm having a problem with this, how do you deal with Dick Cody, how do you deal with this or that one," and he, of course, being a Democrat, would tell me a lot of information I didn't know about where they lived, what was important to them, so he was, you know, they were both enormously helpful, and that's the way governors should be. I think that-- I think former governors can be very helpful to present governors, if present governors have the humility to reach out.

Michael Aron: And your name is being carried forward in state politics by your son, who's the minority leader now in the state senate, has been for maybe four

years now, something like that. How involved are you in his career? Does he seek advice from you, do you dispense advice?

Governor Thomas Kean: Yeah, we talk from time to time. Sometimes he takes it, sometimes he doesn't, which is just as it should be. Very, very proud of him. He has a more difficult job than I did when I had the same kind of-- because I never got into what I call the House of Lords, I was always in the House of the People. But the-- but he has a very, very tough job. The times are different. As I say, I had a number of close friends on the Democratic side who I worked with very closely, and when we were in the majority I helped them with their bills and their problems, and did everything I could, to make sure they succeeded in ways in their own districts. So when the legislature suddenly turned around, I ended up in a small minority, those same people said, what can we do for you? If you need to get your bill through or if you need to do this or that, can we help you with the administration? They were helpful to me in the same way. And that kind of atmosphere doesn't seem to exist anymore, and so it's a much more partisan time and it makes it very difficult for a minority leader, because the majority tends not to give you anything.

Michael Aron: I wonder how that happened. I wonder--

Governor Thomas Kean: It's a Washington disease, and it spread here from Washington. I mean, that was the first real partisanship was down there. And then it came, you know, you're a Republican or you're a Democrat, and you don't talk, and you don't have dinner together anymore, and you-- there is money to beat the hell out of the guy sitting across the aisle, and when you can make points, even if the points aren't quite legitimate, you do it, and you do research to find out any statement your guy across the aisle made that you can put in an advertisement, perhaps when he runs again, even if the statement is taken out of context. And both parties do it, and both parties get mad at each other when they do it, and they have whole partisan staffs now who do nothing but that. I mean, they're really there to catch the other guy, they're not there to help legislation happen, not there to come up with ideas.

Michael Aron: The number of press releases I get in e-mail form in these days, from those partisan offices, every day, ridiculing the other side, I mean, you just start learning to ignore them, because it's all just spin.

Governor Thomas Kean: It's all spin, and it doesn't help anybody, really, and it makes-- but it makes it, particularly for my son as minority leader, it makes it a much harder job, because it is not thought proper anymore to be cooperative. And

when you are cooperative, you get your head handed to you sometimes. Sometimes by both sides, and it's difficult. And when you have an idea and he has a lot of good ideas, I believe, the other party won't listen to them. So I could always get my ideas in when I was there, I could always talk to people who were friends of mine. Maybe not the leadership, but if not, sometimes the other people. I could always find Democrats who would sit down, have lunch and I didn't have to sponsor the bill, they might sponsor the bill. I didn't have to get that idea to the administration, they could do it. But the idea got moving, and things happened, and you felt a sense of satisfaction that, because you were there, the state was a better place. Much harder to do that now, I think. And so I don't blame him, he doesn't seem to be frustrated, I mean, he seems to be energized and working and so on, but it's-- I think it's a much harder job now, and I'm not sure I would have liked it.

Michael Aron: Do you think we'll see him run for governor someday, or US Senate again, as he did in 2006?

Governor Thomas Kean: I have no idea. He picked the wrong year to run, and you can't time in politics and you really can't time. People would have said when I ran, it was the wrong year to run, it turned out to be the right year. So you can't predict that. He did better than any other non-incumbent in the country that year, running, so I was proud of him, but it wasn't-- no way he was going to get elected with George Bush in the shape he was in nationally in that year. So whether he'll do it again, I think he may have one more run left in him. He's got to pick what he wants to run for, but that's up to him. As I say, it's tougher now than it ever was, and so it's very, very hard. One of the things that frustrates me, is when I talk to-- a lot of young people come to see me, some of them from Drew, some of them from Rutgers, who want to go into politics, and somebody has steered them into this office, because they know I like kids, and I'm happy to talk to them and advise them one way or another. And these are wonderful young people, but elective office, no. They want to serve in government and they want to move the thing forward, but they'd much rather do it in appointed office, either nationally or the state, because the nastiness, the money, all of that, in state government and federal government right now, steers them away from elective office and that's very bad for the country, because in the end, it's the elective people who make the decisions, and I'm afraid the quality is declining.

Michael Aron: You have anything in mind that would reform that system?

Governor Thomas Kean: I have a whole lot in mind, but you can't do it. I mean, I think money is the root of all evil, as usual, and the idea that incumbents pile up

these huge war chests so nobody can run against them is sinful in a democracy. I think people should be able to start the same place at the starting gate. The fact that we just got a redistricting map and I'm told that the final decision was, let's protect the incumbents, let's not have too much change. That's terrible. We need change, we need to refresh the part, we need new young people, men and women in this legislature and state government all the time, to keep new ideas and new ways of doing things coming in, and we-- that's happening less and less, and I don't know, as a nation, we're not going to proceed if the brightest and the best will not go into elective politics, and that's pretty close to where we are right now.

Michael Aron: So as we wrap up this series of conversations, let's look back to the 1980s. What was the-- what were the Kean years all about?

Governor Thomas Kean: Hopefully excellence in every area. In some ways, nonpartisanship. When I picked my cabinet, half of it were not Republicans. People who believed in my philosophy, but didn't necessarily have the R after their name. A lot of them were independent, some of them were Democrats. They were about restoring the pride in the state, trying to do things, because I still believe fervently that you can't get anything done unless you believe you can get something done, unless you have pride and possibility, unless you have hope, unless you have expectation, nothing is going to happen. And this sense of malaise and discouragement and so on, that seems to be around today, is the recipe for never changing it and never progressing forward. I hope it was a time of ideas. We accepted ideas from everybody, Republicans, Democrats, our Democratic legislator had an idea, if I embraced it, we tried to get them through. We celebrated that legislator once the bill was passed. I think it was about getting the best ideas, not only from New Jersey, but from around the country. We got mentioned three different national addresses by presidents, as leading the country in education. I'm proud of the fact we went eight years with a Triple A bond rating, one of the three or four in the country. And I thought people were going to be proud of that and never lose it, and we've come a long way, I'm afraid, in the wrong direction. So I'm proud that, fiscally, we were recognized, not only in the state, but by people outside the state as one of the fiscally most responsible governments in the country. I'm proud of our environmental ideas, where again, we led the country and the cleanup of toxic waste and shore protection, wetlands. Nobody else was doing what New Jersey was doing at the time. I'm very, very proud of that. Education, as I say, we did things nobody else was doing, and we did some things nobody has done since. Wish they had. So I mean, there's a whole series of things. I'm very proud of our urban programs, very, very proud of our urban programs. I mean, we really concentrated on some of these, like Newark, Patterson, Trenton, tried to bring them back in one way or another. Not always successful, but we did things in each of

those cities, built things, tried to make people return to the cities in one way or another, gave them tax abatements.

Michael Aron: Is Newark better off today than it was in the '80s?

Governor Thomas Kean: Oh yeah. Although it's had ups and downs, but remember, we-- I sponsored the first urban aid bill, we passed the safe and clean streets bill, which put hundreds of more policemen on the street corner. We gave particular money to-- more money than anybody else ever had, to Newark schools. Some of that was wasted by that court decision, because it just was money, it wasn't done with any kind of education reform in mind, or any kind of educational research, but nevertheless, they had the funds to do-- more funds than they've had since to do with any-- to do. And we tried to worry about the cultural institutions. We gave the Newark Museum the money it needed to flourish, and it has. We started the Performing Arts Center, which I think has been a great benefit. We worked to establish-- funnily enough, I put the-- we sponsored the first grocery store since the riots, not only to-- so that people in the projects wouldn't have to take buses to get their food, but so that kids in the neighborhood could have fresh food and vegetables and not go to the local bodega and end up with Pepsi and French fries or chips. So anyway, we did all those things, and hopefully a lot of other things, but what the vision all over was that there's nothing stopping this state from being the best.

Michael Aron: And how is the state faring now?

Governor Thomas Kean: We've got a lot of problems. Nobody says New Jersey is up at the top in education anymore, nobody. Are we doing terribly, no, but we're not where we should be as the richest state in the country. Our higher education system has almost fallen off a cliff, because we defunded it, not-- we haven't even held it stable. We've lowered funding for higher education, more than any other state in the country. And we're now, almost next to last in that regard, and we can't have a future that way. A lot of the programs we did to attract jobs to the state no longer exist, and therefore we have not been attracting-- that's one of the reasons we haven't been attracting the number of jobs we have to, to sustain our growth. Tax structure now is almost unsustainable, whereas we had taxes that were lower in almost every regard than the states around us. We now have taxes that are highest in almost every regard than the states around us, and that's costing us jobs, as well as costing us people who have been moving out of the state. We don't seem to have quite the pride we did in the '80s, and I think we were pretty proud of ourselves in New Jersey. And we don't seem to have that sense of ourselves

anymore, as what we can be, and that we can take on anybody. It's-- so I'm, you know, I'm worried about the state. I'm worried about our fiscal shape, I'm worried about our tax structure, I'm worried about our educational system, and those three things, much as anything else are the-- are where you start from, really, to build a state, or to rebuild a state.

Michael Aron: And what do you want to do with your remaining years?

Governor Thomas Kean: Be helpful, be helpful, to governors, to anybody. I hope I still have something to contribute. I always have ideas, whether they're good ideas or bad ideas, other people will have to judge. But I always have ideas. I love working with people. I love to see ways in which we can change things for the better. And you know, if people want to work on education, want to work on the environment, want to work on the arts, I'm available to help in every way I can.

Michael Aron: Well, you kind of define the term elder statesman now in this state. How do you-- what do you think of that term, is that acceptable?

Governor Thomas Kean: I'm not so elderly.

<Laughter>

Michael Aron: You don't look it, actually.

Governor Thomas Kean: Well thank you.

Michael Aron: It's been an honor to debrief you over these sessions.

Governor Thomas Kean: Well thank you, thank you very, very much.