**John Lynch Interview** (October 25, 2013)

**Rick Sinding:** Hello. I’m Rick Sinding. It’s Friday, October 25, 2013 here at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University for the Center on the American Governor. With me today is John Lynch, the former mayor of New Brunswick and state senator, who served, first as president of the Senate and later as minority leader in the four years of Jim Florio’s governorship. John - welcome.

**John Lynch:** My pleasure, Rick.

**Rick Sinding:** We’ll probably spend some time later in the interview talking about the difference in the vantage point between being president of the Senate and being minority leader of the Senate. But first, let’s talk a little bit about your background and your introduction to politics. How did you become involved politically? I know your father was mayor and state senator before you.

**John Lynch:** Yes, my father was a mayor under the commission form of government in New Brunswick. They changed it somewhere around 1970, I think, to a strong mayor council Faulkner form. And then he had gone onto the state Senate in late fifties, ’56, ’57, somewhere in there. And then Dick Hughes became the governor and prior to the 1965, ’64 when they had the one man, one vote decision by the U.S. Supreme Court we had the 21 counties each having their own senators. So the Republicans controlled all of the rural counties et cetera. And the Democrats hadn’t have a Senate president in some 50 years.

**Rick Sinding:** And the Senate was referred to in those days as the 21 club.

**John Lynch:** Yes. Very collegial, but the Republicans always controlled it. And in ’65 when Hughes beat Dumont, I think it was the Democrats, it was the first time they had proportionality and they took control of the Senate for the first time in half a century. And my father became the Senate president. And he stayed there until he got ill. He left in ’76, ’77, the year before he died. Bill Hamilton took his place. My father had always admonished me that the worst thing I could do is get involved in local politics.

**Rick Sinding:** So, of course, you ran for mayor.
John Lynch: So I was in a law firm trying cases, having fun, doing whatever. And as fate would have it somebody wanted to run for mayor. They had a cause. And they wanted me to help run the campaign. And we had the misfortune of winning and then he abandoned the ship and took three years and moved to Wyoming. And I either had to step up or step out and I stepped up and so I ran for mayor in 1978. I served three terms. Left when I was Senate president. It was just too much on the plate and more conflicts there than I had experienced before my role as a senator and mayor. So I got out.

Rick Sinding: So in the eighties during the Kean administration you served as both mayor of New Brunswick and as...


Rick Sinding: And that was at the same time that you were stepping up to the Senate presidency?

John Lynch: Yes, well, see what happened in the Kean years in 1981, there was a massive primary in both parties. Everybody ran for governor, if you recall. And the Democrats had a clearing in the Senate of four or five guys running for president, Bill Hamilton.

Rick Sinding: For governor.

John Lynch: Yes, for governor, Merlino, et cetera. So when I arrived, the bench was shallow. I was always able to move up pretty quickly and became chairman of the judiciary committee and the majority leader in four years.

Rick Sinding: The Democrats continued to hold the Senate even during Kean’s...

John Lynch: Yes. We were fortunate. We dodged the 1985 debacle when Kean annihilated Shapiro and we lost control of the Assembly and lost a of seats. I don’t know if it was as many as we lost in ‘91 in the assembly but it was in the same realm. So we were fortunate we weren’t on the ballot that year. So we maintained our majorities right through the election of Florio and right up until 1991 when we had the next debacle.
Rick Sinding: So you had moved up through the ranks, chairman of judiciary and then as majority leader of the state Senate during the latter part of the Kean administration.

John Lynch: Second term I was majority leader. John Russo was Senate president.

Rick Sinding: Now, you’ve done a previous interview with Michael Aaron as part of the Kean archive for the Center on the American Governor.

John Lynch: Yes.

Rick Sinding: So I won’t ask you to go into all of the detail that you did in that one. I’ll refer our readers and viewers to that.

John Lynch: Absolutely.

Rick Sinding: But your relationship with Tom Kean as governor was fairly cordial as I recall.

John Lynch: Very. You know, I was the new kid on the block and I was learning. And they were very open, easy access. Staff was pretty open as well. They always have personal issues with various people on staff, as you know. But for the most part we had a very good relationship and Kean was always willing to sit down and talk about the issues of the day, et cetera. As a matter of fact one of the most interesting things with Kean was when he got reelected in 1985 in a landslide he had John Russo go up to the Newark office one day with Michael Cole and we spent a few hours...

Rick Sinding: Michael Cole was the governor’s counsel at that time.

John Lynch: Right. And we spent a few hours with him and he went over his agenda, what he wanted to do in his second term, some civil service reforms in one of the trusts, five or six issues. And then he said, you know, you guys you tell me what you want to do and if it’s reasonable I’ll get it done. One thing Kean had going for him he was very affable. And he had very good political instincts. And he would always stop by unannounced to the Mort Pye, at the Star Ledger or this one or that
one of various newspapers. And he had a good working relationship. He’d bounce things off them before he did them. And he almost universally got their support for whatever his initiatives where, pretty smart, pretty clever. So he said, “I will-- and if I don’t have any problems with it,” he said, “I’ll even get you the support of most of the newspapers on your initiatives.” And he wasn’t boasting. He was just matter of fact. It was pretty impressive.

Rick Sinding: And you took him up on that.

John Lynch: We took him up on it. And he did fulfill his word. We had a good rapport with him. And he was very generous to John Russo and never closed the door. So it was a good feel. And having served only the one governor, Kean, it was like it was nice way to do business.

Rick Sinding: Step back to ’81 for a minute when all of these different Democrats were running for governor in the primary. And the one who emerged was Jim Florio who ran in the general election. Did you have dealings at that time with Florio? Had you gotten to know him? Whom did you back? Did you back anyone in the ’81 primary?

John Lynch: I forget where the county was in ’81.

Rick Sinding: Was Bill Hamilton one of them...

John Lynch: Bill Hamilton was in. No, there was no endorsement by the county. As a matter of fact, you couldn’t endorse in those days up until the U.S. Supreme Court changed all of that. They threw out the New Jersey legislation effectively in some Missouri case, I believe it was.

Rick Sinding: But the Middlesex County organization would have been supportive of...

John Lynch: Hamilton, oh sure. He had been the assembly speaker. He was a state senator. And he was opening a seat for somebody to come along.

Rick Sinding: That somebody being you.
John Lynch: A lot of seats opened up that year.

Rick Sinding: Did you have occasion to deal with Florio at all during the ‘81 campaign?

John Lynch: Yes, I met with them a few times. And I had known him a little bit from the past. And he was always impressive, young aggressive and articulate, clearly always did his homework. And most of us felt very good about the fact that he was the nominee because you’re looking for somebody that can win and he looked the part, he sounded the part. There was universal agreement, I think, post primary that he was the right horse for the Democratic Party that year.

Rick Sinding: And the closest election in New Jersey history.

John Lynch: Who could have ever predicted what would have happened? Amazing. Absolutely amazing.

Rick Sinding: So for the eight years that you served in the Senate with Kean as governor and Jim Florio is in Washington as a congressman from the first district way down in South Jersey, did you have occasion to have any dealings with him or his office during that period on any issues or any personnel issues, any matters? Or was it pretty much, you know, he’s in Congress, you’re in the state legislature.

John Lynch: You know, Jim spent a lot of time in New Jersey and you run across him on the trail, as it were and exchange pleasantries and so forth. I’d have a few discussions with him over those years. I can’t specifically talk about what the issues were. But for the most part, as you know, Jim had a great amount of support and articulation of the issues involving the insurance industry and environmental laws, et cetera, clean water, clean air, super fund, all of that. And he was getting a lot of good publicity over the years in those two arenas for sure. And both of them were most applicable to a state like New Jersey.

Rick Sinding: Okay. Eighty-nine comes along. Did you back anybody in the primary in ‘89?

John Lynch: No. As a matter of fact, I took look at it, but Barbara was a good friend of mine.
John Lynch: Yes. And, of course...

Rick Sinding: Mayor of Princeton.

John Lynch: Of course Alan was...

Rick Sinding: Alan Karcher the...

John Lynch: He was from Middlesex County at the time.

Rick Sinding: That’s right.

John Lynch: … No, we didn’t get involved but it was clear to all of us and we had done our own polling going back early on to see if there was any potential. And it was so clear that Florio was so far ahead of the field that there was no way that anybody was going to catch him. He was prepared. He had the resources. He had the background. He had run once before which some people always say that’s the key to New Jersey, you have that statewide exposure. But he really didn’t need that at that point in time.

Rick Sinding: When you say, you took a look at it you mean from the idea that you might have run.

John Lynch: Yes, I had an exploratory committee. Yes. But it was so obvious that it would be a waste of time and effort, unless you were looking to put your stamp onto some kind of a statewide run eventually and just get in the race for exercise. I wasn’t interested in that.

Rick Sinding: You were not interested in that.

John Lynch: No.

Rick Sinding: But you did harbor…
John Lynch: But I was very close with Barbara and I spent a lot of time with her and I went through the same issue we talked about. I don’t know how you have any chance here Barbara, Barbara Sigmund. And she said, “I want to do it.” And she probably, not that it was necessary but she probably in effect helped Governor Florio because of Alan. She was splitting Alan’s base to a certain extent, not that he needed it.

Rick Sinding: Although Florio won handily in the primary.

John Lynch: No, he didn’t need it.

Rick Sinding: So in the general election, Florio is running. It’s becoming fairly obvious by around late September, early October that he’s probably going to win. How close were you to the Florio campaign? Or were you just busy running your own...

John Lynch: We were close to the campaign in the sense of what was going on in Middlesex County. Beyond that, it didn’t have a whole to of interaction. We had no problems. It was pretty smooth functioning. And overall, it was a really good year.

Rick Sinding: It was. It was a very good year for Democrats. So November comes along. Florio is elected. The Democrats win control of both the Senate and the Assembly. You had been the majority leader of the Senate.

John Lynch: Right.

Rick Sinding: Is it pretty much pre-ordained that you’re now going to move up to the Senate presidency? Or is there a bit of behind the scenes maneuvering?

John Lynch: There’s always some side play but for the most part it was pre-ordained. John Russo had served for four years following Carmen Orechio who had served for four years as Senate president. We were in the new era of four-year terms before the Alan Rosenthal helped change the campaign finance law and ensure more longevity. And so I had understanding with John Russo that he would stand down and that I would, assuming I can get the vote on my caucus be the next Senate president.
Rick Sinding: So are you all ready at this point even in the transition dealing with Florio and his key people about beginning to develop a legislative agenda or beginning to develop issues that you were going to pursue?

John Lynch: Well, we had staff who were working with the transition and I met with Steve a few times - Steve Perskie nd he was in the Senate when I arrived. He left a year-and-a-half, two years later.

Rick Sinding: He had been the majority leader in the Senate from Atlantic County. Then left to take a judgeship as I recall.

John Lynch: He became the majority leader in ’82 January with Carmen Orechio as Senate president. And he stayed not quite two years.

Rick Sinding: Then was a judge and came back to work in the Florio campaign.

John Lynch: Right.

Rick Sinding: And after the election Florio announced that he would be his chief of staff.

John Lynch: Correct.

Rick Sinding: So you were then working closely with Perskie on the development of a legislative agenda. And Perskie for the first several months of the Florio administration was the key person dealing with the legislature is that right?

John Lynch: Yes, but they were working with others. They would meet with Doug and staffers that were involved.

Rick Sinding: Doug Berman who was the treasurer.

John Lynch: I had met with Doug Berman and the governor in some private sessions at people’s houses to go over things going back once it was obvious that he was going to win and they had a de facto transition going on behind the scenes. And Doug was always around.
Rick Sinding: That de facto transition behind the scenes, my recollection is that when Perskie came on to the campaign which was sometime around August or September of 1989, it was with the understanding that he was sort of presiding over the transition.

John Lynch: Mm-hm.

Rick Sinding: And he and Doug Berman who was the campaign manager and would later be appointed as the state treasurer, were the two key people who began working on what the administration was going to look like.

John Lynch: Right.

Rick Sinding: And how the governor was going to hit the ground running when he took office in February.

John Lynch: Sure.

Rick Sinding: So you’re all ready having dealings or meetings with Perskie and Berman to begin discussing that agenda.

John Lynch: Yes, we talked campaign. We talked-- yes, relationships, Senate, were there going to be any issues with them. And we had some homework and there were none. Danny Dalton was in line to become the majority leader. He was a big fan of Governor Florio.

Rick Sinding: Had worked with Florio way back.

John Lynch: Had worked with Florio and ultimately became secretary of state under Florio, I believe.

Rick Sinding: Mm-hm. In the second two years.

John Lynch: Yes, we had good lines of communications that way.
**Rick Sinding:** Did you have personnel discussions as well. Did you have people that you were putting forward for positions in the administration?

**John Lynch:** I forget who left, if anyone. But most of the people stayed with us.

**Rick Sinding:** In the legislative staff, and in the legislature.

**John Lynch:** Yes .... We had very great synergy with our staff and most of them, if not all, stayed. But they had good relationships with the front office and the perceived leadership of the Florio transition.

**Rick Sinding:** Did the leadership of the Florio transition vet people with you? Middlesex County people who were being considered for appointment?

**John Lynch:** You know, I don’t have a specific recollection but I think the answer is yes, that whoever was moving up and I don’t recall anyone getting a significant spot in the administration from Middlesex. I could be wrong.

**Rick Sinding:** Would that have been how that worked? That they would have come to you as the senator from that county to say do you have any problems with so-and-so? I mean is that how that normally works at the beginning of an administration?

**John Lynch:** Oh sure. They would have, of course, done that if there was somebody of prominence, even slightly controversial, sure, absolutely. But I don’t recall any of that, that here was any gaps, any problems, any missteps along the way. It was pretty smooth.

**Rick Sinding:** So January 1990 comes along, Jim Florio takes office. And the first six months of that administration were probably among the most active six months legislative certainly in modern New Jersey history. There were a series of major initiatives.

**John Lynch:** Certainly in terms of controversy.

was probably not so controversial but it’s a major activity. You are the new Senate president, the leader of the Democrats in the Senate, the governor’s party. And you’re called upon to enact a very ambitious set of legislative initiatives. Let’s speak, in general, first before we get into the specifics of each of those subject areas. Did you by and large share Florio’s enthusiasm for each of those issues? Did you have any misgivings about any of those initiatives? And if so, did you voice those misgivings to the front office?

**John Lynch:** Yes. Politics of the issues and the timing was critical to us. And we had a lot of people who had been around for a long time, some of them in our caucus that would never vote for significant tax increases, et cetera that we knew we were going to have difficulty dealing with. So the timing was going to be very important. And we ran into a problem early on because it was clear that the administration wanted to solve their so called budget shortfall with the sales tax increase. And that they were going to do to fund what was coming down the road from the Supreme Court. Everyone knew what was going to happen. It was just a question of to what degree they wanted to accelerate, accentuate the income tax. And the Senate almost to a person wanted to take care of the budget, do the sales tax, do whatever cuts were necessary to the auto insurance which was long overdue with what was happening in the residual market. And then wait for the Supreme Court decision and go kicking and screaming to fund it. As opposed to doing this in a heartbeat almost reacting waiting for the Supreme Court decision and moving very quickly and talking about it in terms of quality education, et cetera. The problem was that-- and there may be some disagreement with this but to a person or a caucus those that are living would say this is what happened. The Assembly leadership, in a lot of their caucus, they had just taken control. We had been in the majority for quite a while. They believed that the Senate would never pass the income tax. And that they wanted to do everything first, the Assembly, of course, has to initiate.

**Rick Sinding:** Technically.

**John Lynch:** Technically. I mean the constitution calls for it. So it does technically initiate there. But the fact is they wanted to be able to control it so we had to pass the income tax before they were cast adrift. And that became a point of real concern because our people felt, and so did I, that you needed political timing here. You needed to choreograph this in a way that made sense to the public. You needed to get the public involved in why this was all necessary. And, in fact, that you would have some real semblance of property tax relief, because if you’re from New Jersey you know that property taxes is always high on the agenda primarily because of our
redundancy in government about the schools and municipalities. So we had that ongoing battle. And we, of course, lost.

**Rick Sinding:** Now, the assembly wanted to get this done quickly.

**John Lynch:** I don’t think they cared as much quickly. The administration wanted it quickly. Doug Berman wanted it quickly. Doug Berman is the one who wound up in the cross hairs of a lot of the legislature as a result of how he choreographed this and the commitments that he made that weren’t fulfilled.

**Rick Sinding:** What...

**John Lynch:** Marketing the program, spending a lot of money through the state committee, explaining to the public why this was necessary, what it was going to do and so that there wasn’t this monumental reaction.

**Rick Sinding:** Do you think that there was less effort to explain it publicly than you had been lead to believe there would be?

**John Lynch:** Absolutely. I mean you have any number of staff people that were involved on a day to day basis that commitments were strong. And it never happened. So that left him-- that made it difficult for a lot of our members going down the road who felt they were hung out to dry.

**Rick Sinding:** Why do you think it never happened?

**John Lynch:** I don't know the answer to that. I never got the answer to that. You know, before too long Doug wasn’t around anymore.

**Rick Sinding:** What would that have entailed? What kind of roll out did you see happening...

**John Lynch:** Radio, TV, state wide programs, spending money to explain the parts, why this was necessary, what the Supreme Court was doing here. What it was going to do to their property taxes, et cetera, et cetera, and how they are going to fix some of the problems with the schools and the-- inherently the issues
involving what makes New Jersey’s property tax so preeminent in this country. And it’s gotten worse rather than better.

**Rick Sinding:** There was clearly a determination made by Doug Berman and by the governor that they would rather spend their political capital up front and then recoup it over the next three-and-a-half years rather than doing this slower roll out as you had described it. But I’m interested in your...

**John Lynch:** That’s where the problem came in because while we didn’t agree with that, they committed and you’ve got a new governor, he’s a popular governor. He’s got the ball. They committed that they were going to sell this program to the public. They didn’t have to sell it to us. Some parts...

**Rick Sinding:** I was going to say there were some members of your caucus that...

**John Lynch:** There were some refinements and we had to do a lot of arm twisting to get the votes because a lot of people thought they were walking the plank and indeed, they were right. So that part wasn’t easy. But in the bigger picture while it wasn’t easy we felt that we would be able to produce the votes. It was more important to us, you know, good policy and good politics is a good fit. And if you don’t have the two working together, you’re going to abort your policy anyhow eventually. So that’s where the problem arose with Berman. And Berman was clearly the head of the pack when it came to interacting with the legislature making commitments, selling the program, and how they were going to make it bought into by the public, how they were going to sell it to the public.

**Rick Sinding:** As far as the policy was concerned, there were no big problems in terms of your caucus?

**John Lynch:** Well, the problem was how much money are you going to spend on the schools...

**Rick Sinding:** And the apportionment between rural and urban, suburban.

**John Lynch:** ...and how are you going to fix this deep dark hole including the betterment of the schools, per se, the money being spent wisely and we can get into that later on. But the fact is that we had real concerns about that. We were just pouring money into something here. A lot of people had this concern. We’re just
pouring money into something at the end of the day we’re not going to have a product because you always have this disparity with the Abbott Districts. And you’re chasing your tail because the more money you put in, the suburban richer districts keep growing and growing and growing. So the Abbott’s are always chasing after the richer suburban districts. And there was no way to solve that short of having some kind of a flexible cap that you had for the Abbott’s and you had a tougher cap for the more affluent districts. And that’s the $64 question. When you look at the Supreme Court decision and how it plays out in practice because the real world is you’ll never-- the Abbott’s will never catch the suburban districts short of having some kind of caps that will help produce the result.

Rick Sinding: My recollection is that the legislature and the Senate, in particular, did prevail upon the Florio administration to make some adjustments in the formula.

John Lynch: Later QEA2. We passed QEA1 and then we had a commission from Bell Atlantic, of course, I had Bell Atlantic, and was a chairman and we had a really decent commission and they went through the schools, in part. There were a lot of things they wanted to do, thought we could do to create more efficiencies to get rid of the smaller districts because they didn’t have a breadth of curriculum and et cetera. And there was a great disparity between the bigger districts, particularly in the consolidated districts, seven or eight big ones who were producing good results. And the smaller districts who just didn’t have the resources to start with. And as a consequence they didn’t have the breadth of curriculum and manpower et cetera. So they did a lot of good work. But, in reality, what they came up with was in order to meet the Supreme Court decision and create some effectiveness you had to have an flexible cap so one for the Abbott’s and one for the suburban districts and have it be a real cap, not an illusory cap that we’ve had so many of.

Rick Sinding: And that’s what QEA2 did?

John Lynch: That’s what QEA2 did and it took money and push it back against the camps to the municipalities so that in-- ironically in 1991 if you look at the tax records across for the state you only year property taxes were flat and we couldn’t sell it. But that happened because we really pushed about 900 million against the cap. Without the cap it doesn’t happen. And as you know, subsequent to the passage of the income tax in QEA1 the NJEA contracts across the state were averaging thirty percent for three years. Not that the teachers weren’t underpaid. They were. But the NJEA represents everybody.
**Rick Sinding:** And that reminds me of another element of the whole QEA, Quality Education Act, that was very controversial and that, in fact, cost the administration the support of the NJEA which had to do with the funding of teacher pensions.

**John Lynch:** Yes.

**Rick Sinding:** That that cost was now to be borne by the local district rather than by the state. And that the teachers rebelled against this and withheld their support...

**John Lynch:** From the union.

**Rick Sinding:** The NJEA.

**John Lynch:** There’s a difference.

**Rick Sinding:** Okay. The teacher’s union withheld their support.

**John Lynch:** They wanted everything. They wanted all of the money and they wanted everything their way. You know, that’s understandable. They’re a union. But that wasn’t necessarily the best policy for the taxpayers or the state of New Jersey in how we move forward. But I think the more critical issue is how do you solve the Abbott versus Burke formula problem.

**Rick Sinding:** So you think that the decision above and beyond the shifting of resources and the changing of the formula, to also change the funding of the pensions and therefore incur the wrath of the NJEA do you think that was a step beyond where the legislation should have gone in retrospect?

**John Lynch:** Well, I always thought that legislation should have gone in the first place in QEA2. So you were achieving some property tax relief. You could sell it a la what we talked about with Doug Berman that there’s something in this for everyone. What I learned in New Brunswick as mayor was no matter what you’re doing you have to convince the people that there’s something in it for them, regardless of whether they are the direct beneficiary or not, how this fits into a bigger picture. And sometimes we underestimate the public and the voters in terms of what they grasp and how they look at issues. And if you look at the current
issues, what’s it do for me? Am I getting hurt by it? And all too often, we don’t articulate to the public what’s in it for them. And in this case, where you’re doing this massive increase in revenue taxes and I think it was absolutely necessary that we should convince the public that this was in their best interest and they were the beneficiaries on the property tax side, on the education side and for the future of the state generally. It just didn’t happen. I don’t think it was Governor Florio’s fault. I really believe that it was the people who were running the orchestration of the timing of this who didn’t see the wisdom of that just like with the assault weapons where having been involved with my father, I remembered all too well what happened in 1967, when they passed the income tax-- no that was Byrne.

Rick Sinding: It might have been the sales tax.

John Lynch: Oh, no they did strike benefits and gun control.

Rick Sinding: This was in the Hughes administration?

John Lynch: This was in the Hughes administration. And the strike benefit law was enormously controversial. And the biggest reason it was controversial is because the NRA they don’t fight their issue publicly. They rallied around this strike benefit law and made life miserable. And they did just the same thing they did with Hands Across New Jersey, the same thing.

Rick Sinding: We’ll get to that in a minute.

John Lynch: And they wiped out the Democrats in the legislature the following year. But they did it under the banner of strike benefits.

Rick Sinding: All right. Let’s continue in this vein because that’s clearly an area where we want to go. Before the passage of the QEA and the massive changes in the financial structure of the state about a month or so before that was the assault weapons ban which was very popular politically.

John Lynch: What month was that?

Rick Sinding: This must have been March or April of 1990. It was definitely the spring of 1990.
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John Lynch: I know it was early on.

Rick Sinding: And it was before the QEA.

John Lynch: It was right after the California shooting.

Rick Sinding: Well, first came the environmental prosecutor, then came auto insurance reform, then came assault weapons. And the assault weapons I mean I vividly remembered, I’m sure you do too the descent of the NRA on the legislative chambers were at that time were over in the state house annex because the Senate and Assembly chambers were being renovated in the state house. And I assume that you like Steve Perskie who related to us that he had a state police guard escorting him back and forth to the legislative chamber. I assumed that you too had some...

John Lynch: We did have a whole lot of security in those days. But the only thing I had ever done right is I never got a courtesy plate, so I didn’t have a number one plate. And in all of our caucuses I’ll never Bob Menendez telling me once that he was getting the single finger wave at toll booths and such because of the license plate. But I didn’t have that. We didn’t run into it a whole lot. Oh sure, they crowded the halls, and they’d shout and do various and sundry things.

Rick Sinding: You never felt personally threatened during that time?

John Lynch: No, I don’t recall that. I’m an urban guy.

Rick Sinding: What about politically? It was obviously a very difficult political time in terms of trying to sell, not necessarily to sell the policy of assault weapons ban but certainly the politics of it were difficult.

John Lynch: Well, you raise an interesting issue, though, and as I had raised the strike benefits and the guns at the time that this is-- we’ve got to be very careful here, the timing of this isn’t very good because we’re about to do income taxes. We’re doing sales tax. We’re going to do income tax. We’re going to do the school reform and here we’re giving them this on a silver platter to wreak havoc. I couldn’t have predicted, nor did I that Hands Across New Jersey would gather these troops across the state and make life very, very difficult politically and otherwise. But we had raised the issue. They said, oh, we have this wonderful polling 80 percent, 85
percent. Well, since that time we’ve all learned a little differently that the polling means nothing because those 80 percent they’re not voting not that issue. Twenty percent are and you take 20 percent and put them in one corner and you’re fighting uphill. They are single issue voters. And you don’t want to give them anything to stand on by feeding them another issue that they can sort of hide behind and use as a weapon for lack of a better term. And they were able to do that just like they had done with strike benefits. Now, I’ve seen this issue since then 40 times in polls 80 percent, 85 percent, post the Connecticut mayhem the same thing of thing but people aren’t going to vote on it. Only the people who are from the gun lobby and they’re amazingly organized. And they have extraordinary resources. And they have a lot of zealots.

Rick Sinding:  Now, you had in your mind, in the back of your mind, the strike benefits story from...

John Lynch:  I don’t have it in the back of mind. I raised it many times.

Rick Sinding:  You did?

John Lynch:  Oh sure.

Rick Sinding:  And what was the reaction?

John Lynch:  Remember, we’re talking about polling was all ready very much in vogue but it was just escalating in terms of local level polling and district level polling. When I first started in this business there was very little of it on the local level, but now we’re seeing all of these polls and we’re reading this information. We know that the public generally is 75, 80 percent supportive of the bans on assault weapons. But as history plays out now, you can see what that means, you can see why the current administration in Washington is loath to step down the road. And one of the reasons is you can’t do a whole lot about it. New jersey all ready had one of the most formidable gun control laws in the country but the proliferation of guns around us was out of control. And no matter what we did in New Jersey or no matter what Michael Bloomberg does in New York it doesn’t solve the problem. As we talked early there’s 700 million guns in this country and growing rapidly. And every time there’s a major issue their troops find out that maybe there’s going to be more controls and they go out and buy more guns and ammo. I remember when Obama got elected into 2008, there was a rapid response coming out of the NRA that Obama was going to tax ammunition and make it very, very difficult to buy
ammunition. They sold out, all of the ammo in every store, Cabela’s across the country at every one of these shops. And they use every one of these issues to sell. They sell. They probably sold more assault weapons back in that era than at any time before.

**Rick Sinding:** In this particular instance, though, what you’re suggesting is that it wasn’t so much the reaction in terms of proliferation of guns in New Jersey as it was giving an incentive to the NRA to become actively involved in other issues to pay back the Florio administration, payback Democratic legislators who voted for this.

**John Lynch:** Oh sure.

**Rick Sinding:** Now did you raise--

**John Lynch:** Do you have any doubt that they were instrumental in the Hands Across New Jersey?

**Rick Sinding:** I have no doubt in retrospect. I think most of the people who were involved in the Florio administration have no doubt in retrospect. The question is did anybody have the assumption at that time that that was going to be the reaction? I mean, did you specifically say to the Florio administration, “Listen. One of the problems in doing this assault weapons thing is that when you try to do this-this massive tax reform the NRA is going to- is going to come along and- and uhm.. develop a response to that and- and fight you every step of the way.”

**John Lynch:** Yes, but only in the context of saying from a historic standpoint what had occurred before when you give them a separate issue at the same time and it’s controversial and that they will take advantage of it. Did I see Hands Across New Jersey coming down the road? No. So you knew there were going to be zealots. You didn’t know what form it was going to take. There was no PR that they were instrumental in the formation of the Hands Across New Jersey, but you know that’s the case.

**Rick Sinding:** Do you think they were instrumental in the creation of it, or do you think they capitalized on the reaction--
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**John Lynch:** Oh, I think they were instrumental in creating it. I don’t think it was singularly them, but they were right there at the table from the beginning, no question about it.

**Rick Sinding:** And you think they bankrolled it.

**John Lynch:** It’s just like they were involved in I&R, you know? There were less people to support I&R, but they wanted I&R because--

**Rick Sinding:** Initiative and referendum, yes.

**John Lynch:** --it’s populist. We finally short-circuited that when we called some people’s bluff because the medical societies, the NRA, the teacher’s union, all of them were opposed <laughs> to I&R, and the Republicans were making believe they were supportive of it. They never were. They went away.

**Rick Sinding:** Expand on that a little. I don’t recall this particular incident.

**John Lynch:** This was either in ’91 or ’92 when Bob Franks ______ were pushing the I&R agenda, and they were using it in conjunction with Hands Across New Jersey, and they were selling this as they <inaudible> public needs I&R, and we finally said, “You know what? We’ll- we’ll provide you the votes. We’ll post it committee, and we’ll provide you half the votes.” They walked away. They left, never to be seen again because all of their funding comes from the very interest groups that are definitely opposed to it.

**Rick Sinding:** <laughs> Let’s go into this a little. This would be to allow initiative and referendum California style, I would say. Initiative and referendum in New Jersey, which is not <inaudible>.

**John Lynch:** Oh no, ours was more limited in scope. The legislation was moving down here. It was called limited or something like that. This was a different procedure.

**Rick Sinding:** But this would allow public questions to be placed on the ballot if a certain number of petitions signed by citizens were initiated.
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John Lynch: Correct.

Rick Sinding: And your belief is that all of these interest groups, which feel as though they have greater influence over representative democracy than they would over initiative would’ve actually opposed it.

John Lynch: Yes.

Rick Sinding: And it was that that caused the Republicans to fall back from it.

John Lynch: On the surface they were all making believe they were supportive of it, and it was really a political tool by the Republicans. I don’t blame them for waxing political, but we called their bluff, said, “We’ll post it, put- put- we’ll give you half the votes.” They didn’t show up for the meeting, and that was really the last time that surfaced.

Rick Sinding: Let’s go way back to the beginning of 1990 and talk a little about auto insurance because that was the first of the initiatives that came out, considerably less controversial than the ones that followed. But still you had a fairly substantial insurance industry in this state that was up in arms about it. How difficult was it for you to shepherd that particular piece of legislation through?

John Lynch: Not nearly as difficult as any of the rest of it because first of all our groundwork had been laid. Florio ran a campaign on it. The facts were clear. We had this Joint Underwriting Agency or whatever you call it, the JUA. The infamous JUA, and yet people in the voluntary market, people in the residual market, while the residual market is supposed to be supported by the voluntary market because you’d assume there’d be 80 percent of the people in the voluntary market, but the way the insurance industry was running this and the administrative side of it, there actually became more people in the JUA than in the voluntary market.

Rick Sinding: The JUA being the risk pool, right?

John Lynch: The residual market, yes. And the insurance industry was pushing a lot of people there. They were still getting their piece, whatever. And so it became very clear that there was no way this could sustain itself, and it had been around the track several times. So the administration had some good folks. I forget who
directly was involved. I don’t know, was Greg involved? But anyhow Paul Lanzano-
-
Rick Sinding: Greg, Paul-- Greg Lawler.

John Lynch: Paul Lanzano was our insurance guy. He was pretty talented. He
had been involved with Adubato and those people for a long time, and he
understood the dynamic of it. And we had a lot of issues in terms of refinement,
but it was pure refinement. The policy itself clearly needed to be changed, and it
proved successful as you can be in a state like New Jersey.

Rick Sinding: Then came the assault weapons. There must’ve been some
Democratic legislators from rural areas who you could not-- I don’t recall exactly
what the final vote was. I know you ended up getting one Republican vote, Bill
Gormley.

John Lynch: I think it was 21 plus 1. I think we had 22, I think.

Rick Sinding: And how many Democrats were there in the senate at that point?

John Lynch: Twenty-three. Twenty-one or twenty-three. I think Ray Zane--

Rick Sinding: From Salem County.

John Lynch: --ultimately went to the other side, was just 100 percent no way he
was ever going to vote for that. And he articulated a lot of times how this was
going to cause all kinds of mayhem for people in the caucus. And I think there was
one other person who didn’t vote for it, but we got 21 votes.

Rick Sinding: Plus the one Republican.


Rick Sinding: Gormley, who came over. Okay. Now getting back on the tax
issue. Why was the assembly so interested in pushing this first before the senate?
What were the political dynamics there?
John Lynch: I like Joe Doria. I like Joe a lot.

Rick Sinding: Joe was the speaker of the assembly at the time.

John Lynch: Joe was the speaker. He was the new speaker. I think they had been in the minority for a while, and it stunted their vision of the political side of this. And they just didn’t believe that we would pass the income tax and that they would be left holding the bag. They wanted the school dollars. They wanted school reformation. They wanted income tax passed. They said, and correctly so, that the sales tax is regressive and so forth, but they were willing to pass it. But the question was, “Okay, if you’re willing to pass it as part of the budget fix I’ll allow what happened with Tom Kean in 1982 uhm.. if you’re willing to pass it then uh.. then we have to do it in a cor- in a way that is saleable, that we can let the public understand why- why we’re doing all this.” And we needed that Supreme Court decision to sink in and fester in order to react to it because let’s face it. Legislatures universally are reactive.

Rick Sinding: Right. That would be the argument for not pushing ahead quickly on the tax part of it but waiting for the Supreme Court decision.

John Lynch: You could do the sales tax and do the budget. We weren't looking at doing the Supreme Court decision in June. We were looking at subsequently, where you didn’t have to go through what happened decades before with sort of a shut-down in the legislature, but make it clear that people don’t want to vote for tax increases but at the same time sell that what you’re working on is how they’re going to get relief on the other side of the ledger. And as you know, New Jersey has the worst in the land. I mean, I saw the stats last year. The top 25 counties in the country there’s 18 from New Jersey in terms of highest property taxes.

Rick Sinding: So the judgment, then, would’ve been you can sell doing a short-term budget fix by raising the sales tax and doing a few other things to cut that deficit. But then the whole issue of completely revamping the tax structure in order to deal with the Supreme Court decision about funding the schools ought to be treated separately because that needs a completely different role?

John Lynch: It’s a whole different animal. And don’t tax toilet paper.

<laughter>
Rick Sinding: And you think that by combining the two it ended up confusing the issue, is that the problem?

John Lynch: It fueled the fire. Look what they’re doing. All they want to do is tax and spend. And the NRA and Hands Across New Jersey, they were good to go and the Republicans locked it down. They went into a mode where they weren't going to provide any votes for anything. And they pretty much carried that out right through the end of 1991 no matter what it was. And they developed a real discipline, and it’s more reflective of today’s world than the days heretofore. And that’s somewhat understandable as well.

Rick Sinding: Some people have suggested that the Hands Across New Jersey movement in New Jersey was sort of a precursor of the tea party. Do you think that that's an accurate assessment?

John Lynch: Yes, I think it is but they’re coming from two different worlds. I think the tea party was an Obama reaction, and there’s a lot of undercurrents involved there that stimulated them in the first instance. That wasn’t the case here in New Jersey. The primary energy was provided by the NRA.

Rick Sinding: And an adverse reaction to taxes, clearly.

John Lynch: No, but they used that. Somebody has to provide the leadership and the energy and the resources to move this forward in the way that they did. It didn’t happen ad hoc just like the tea party didn’t happen ad hoc.

Rick Sinding: Who’s behind the tea party?

John Lynch: There’s a lot of money, and you know where it’s coming from. But there’s also some race behind it. I don’t think there’s any question about it. And all of the sudden they unfolded not too many months after President Obama took office.

Rick Sinding: On the Hands Across New Jersey movement my recollection is that throughout the latter part of 1990 when Hands Across New Jersey started and was clearly fueled by a new New Jersey radio station, 101.5, there was no mention at the time of involvement of the NRA. It was all thought at the time, at least publically, to be a spontaneous reaction started by John Budzash, a postman from
Jackson Township or Howell Township who called up the radio station and other people started calling the radio station, and it just combusted from there, and it was a real grassroots movement. At what point do you think it became in your view obvious that it was, in fact, National Rifle Association money that was pushing this?

**John Lynch:** Within a month. I think you’re probably correct that they didn’t initiate this but they saw it quickly. Budzash, as he proved later, couldn’t organize a block party. He ran for office a couple of times. He was a character. <laughs> He wasn’t a bad guy but he was a character, and he was inept. And so this unfolding of the Hands Across New Jersey needed some leadership, needed some resources, needed some acumen and they provided it. And it was clear. I know some of the characters that were involved.

**Rick Sinding:** I don’t recall that that ever became a public issue during that period or even during the legislative elections of 1991.

**John Lynch:** Well, they were wearing a white hat, and nobody really wanted to take them on in public in so many ways. They were playing defense, which is another thing that happened as a result of all this happening so quickly. People were on the defensive, the elected officials, and it changes your view of the world and how you function. Better to play offense than defense, and we were definitely on the defense. And people were intimated by all of this and they wanted to try to calm the waters when, in fact, there was no way to do that because it was being fueled.

**Rick Sinding:** Would it be safe to say in thinking through all of these controversial initiatives in that first six months of the Florio administration that you were pretty much entirely supportive of the policies that were embodied in those initiatives?

**John Lynch:** General policies, yes.

**Rick Sinding:** But had some difficulty with the politics of them.

**John Lynch:** Difficulty with the politics. Had difficulty with the parts of the income tax increases in QEA-1 because there was a lot of fear that this money would just be absorbed and would not go into a functional structure of the schools to enhance them and their capabilities.
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**Rick Sinding:** But in terms of their redistributive portions of the tax in the sense of raising more in income taxes and giving it back to municipalities and school districts in the form of state aid that would reduce property taxes, you were strongly supportive of that.

**John Lynch:** The caveat is reduced property taxes because it wasn’t going to reduce property taxes until you put the cap in and pushed this money up against the cap.

**Rick Sinding:** I see, which was QEA-2.

**John Lynch:** Which was QEA-2.

**Rick Sinding:** But you did that.

**John Lynch:** Which is why in 1991 it was a flat tax. But I’m not blaming anyone. I think it was just part of the dilemma of moving too fast, not going through this with a real committee structure that was going to examine all the parts of our education system, how you would really fix for the long term the decision, satisfy it, because it’s a very difficult one to do, maybe even more so today. These 30 towns aren’t necessarily the towns that need the most help. <laughs> But it provided a difficult dilemma, and the only way functionally that you could do it was having two caps.

**Rick Sinding:** Would these initiatives have been more successful in your view if they had been rolled out more slowly over a longer period of time with more time to explain them to the public?

**John Lynch:** Absolutely. I think we could’ve sold-- of course, the governor has the pulpit and I think he would’ve been good at it. I think he could’ve sold the QEA and the income tax as a real property tax relief measure if we had waited and fixed it with the help of people on the outside who ultimately were brought in to satisfy not only the Supreme Court decision but the angst in the public eye that we weren't raising their taxes. We were shifting these taxes.

**Rick Sinding:** In order to accomplish that you would’ve had to have done it separately from closing the budget gap initially.
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John Lynch: But in the middle of this you have the NRA, and it can never be left out.

Rick Sinding: A perfect storm, in a way.

John Lynch: It was a perfect storm.

Rick Sinding: All right. So the first six months are over, and now is it safe to say that the Democrats in the legislature are beginning to develop a bunker mentality?

John Lynch: Oh, without question. No question about it. And people were already looking for another job as it were.

Rick Sinding: Is that right? The handwriting was on the wall for a lot of Democratic legislators that they were not going to get reelected?

John Lynch: Right.

Rick Sinding: How did that express itself to you during 1991 from let’s say the fallout the summer of 1990. Get into the fall of 1990 things are pretty much spiraling out of control in terms of the tax revolt. What kind of pressures did you begin to feel from your own caucus about perhaps making some changes or trying to redefine the initiatives?

John Lynch: To keep them on board and to keep them energized and as positive as possible is one of the reasons why we did the QEA-2 because it gave them not only something to do but something to ensure themselves that they could go out and articulate that “Here’s how this is going to work and here’s why you’re going to get property tax relief, and so this is no massive giveaway and that uh.. there is something in it for you and it’s the most sig- significant thing,” because property taxes at the time were polling in the top two issues of the state. So a lot of them got ensconced in this and stayed with it, and so we were able to keep them on board. Then we had campaigns going for the people in the targeted type districts not knowing, of course, the people that were in safe districts would also be swept away in November of 1991. But most of them got reenergized and believed that they could win. We had some top-notch consultants around the country who’d come in to try to help and would stay positive with convincing the members who were being supported by them and our resources that they could win.
**Rick Sinding:** So into 1991 was there a general feeling that the tide that had begun in 1990 was beginning to slow down, that maybe what the Florio administration people felt, which was spend the capital up front and then work your way back to rebuilding it? But you were in the process of rebuilding it throughout 1991? Was there a sense of optimism that you could actually retain control of both houses of the legislature?

**John Lynch:** There was hope, so we kept as much hope alive, as they say, as possible, because the tide hadn’t shifted. The energy on the other side from the public side of this was strong, and people were still feeling it at home, knocking on doors, going to town meetings, doing whatever. They were feeling it. It wasn’t going away quickly. And of course, QEA-2 didn’t help because the teachers were opposed to that.

**Rick Sinding:** The pension piece was part of QEA-2?

**John Lynch:** Yes, but that wasn’t the real issue. The issue was that the caps. Was control of the contracts.

**Rick Sinding:** So election night 1991 you lose 10 seats in the senate, 22 seats in the assembly. The assembly is now a veto-proof, more than two-thirds Republican.

**John Lynch:** And the senate.

**Rick Sinding:** And the senate as well.

**John Lynch:** It was 27-13, I believe.

**Rick Sinding:** Was it 27-13? Okay, but just barely. So on assault weapons, for example, you still had Gormley so it wouldn’t be exactly two-thirds, and that saved an override of the assault weapons ban, as I recall.

**John Lynch:** Yes, and I forget the dynamic of that, but it really didn’t move in the senate for some reason. I don’t remember it. Because it would seem to me there had to be more to it that a fellow like Ray Zane would’ve voted for the override.
Rick Sinding: But had he survived the-- boy, we’re tapping both of our brains, our memories now.

<laughter>

John Lynch: Yes, I think he did. I think he did. He shifted parties later in 1996 or so when one of our political leaders in the state was adverse to him on the Democratic side, and Ray shifted over and became a Republican.

Rick Sinding: Yes, so I don’t recall what the dynamic was--

John Lynch: I forget who took the seat.

Rick Sinding: --but the senate did not overturn the assault weapons ban.

John Lynch: Did not.

Rick Sinding: Overturned pretty much every-- well, certainly overturned the taxes.

John Lynch: Well, they were easily done. You may recall, and Steve D’Amico certainly recalls because he was deeply involved that we tried to roll back all the taxes after the November 1991 election when in fact we passed it. Republicans said, “We’re going to get rid of all these taxes,” so we said, “Boom. We’ll do it for you,” because we wanted them to have to pass taxes. We passed it in the senate and we had the votes in the assembly, but the tie-in actually literally bought off some votes with goodies. And the governor wasn’t strongly in favor of it, but we felt that it was in his best interest as well as ours to say, “Okay. you- you railed against all these taxes and you said you don’t have to do it, and uh.. so let’s roll them back, then you start from scratch. Let’s see what you’re going to do.”

Rick Sinding: Except the budget is the governor’s responsibility, right? The governor proposes and the legislature disposes.

John Lynch: It is what it is, and, you know-- right. Exactly. So he could’ve proposed anything he wanted to, but the ball’s in their court. They have to fund it.
**Rick Sinding:** And that’s what happened anyway, as I recall. I mean, the governor proposed his budget in 1992, and the legislature passed its own, the governor vetoed it and they overrode him, and it was the legislature’s budget. So that was going to happen anyway, regardless of the circumstances.

**John Lynch:** Exactly.

**Rick Sinding:** Now I’ll ask you what I promised I would ask you at the very beginning. What’s the view like from the minority leadership post compared to the center of presidency?

**John Lynch:** Well, you know, it was a whole different world for me in terms of my first eight years where fixing things, policy, was paramount. And then not that the first year of Florio wasn’t policy, but once the Republicans dug in their heels and became totally out of it it started a wave of no bipartisanship whatsoever. Now, some of that’s been fueled over the years going back from my father’s time with the advent of partisan staffs, and the bigger the partisan staff the more partisan you get. And I see that here. I see that in Washington, et cetera, and there’s a direct correlation. And then the breach widens and widens and widens between the members where there’re-- you have friends, but it’s not like it was. And this was a time where we really got into that in a deep way. So from the standpoint of minority there was no more policy. It was politics, because there was no role to play in policy.

**Rick Sinding:** Yet there were some initiatives. I mean, Jim Florio says that in some respects he had not an easier time but he found that there were places where there was common ground with the Republican legislators, and there were some initiatives that we developed.

**John Lynch:** There’s no question that if you were the governor that you would want one house in the other party or two. That’s usually a pretty good blueprint.

**Rick Sinding:** I doubt that Barack Obama would agree with that assessment right now. <laughs>

**John Lynch:** I understand, but that’s a whole different world. There are 80 people that are out in Mars somewhere.
**Rick Sinding:** But your dealings with Tom Kean would attest to the fact that there was a cooperative relationship between the Democratic legislature--

**John Lynch:** Look at your current governor. Do you think he wants both houses back?

**Rick Sinding:** Hmmm.

**John Lynch:** You have a foil. You always have something to play off with. You know, the biggest asset Tom Kean had in his first term was Alan Karcher, and so I suspect that the current governor would like to take back the senate because of advice and consent and appointments, but he doesn’t want any part of the assembly because it’s very good politics. He can get most of the things he wants to get done, and he always has that fail-safe to play “They’re the problem.” And we’ve seen that over the years. I mean, look at Kean. Kean had both houses Democrat in his first term, and he had one house Democrat in the second term because senate wasn’t on a ballot.

<laughter>

**John Lynch:** But otherwise he would’ve had both, but I don’t think he wanted it because--

**Rick Sinding:** It’s interesting and never occurred to me until just now the vagaries of the census, that 1991, if it had not been the first year after the 1990 census and therefore the senate was also up, would otherwise have been a split legislature, right, as it was with Kean.

**John Lynch:** Well, no, in ’91 we got beat. We were both on a ballot.

**Rick Sinding:** But you were both on the ballot because of redistricting following the 1990 census.

**John Lynch:** Oh, yes. Yes.

**Rick Sinding:** Otherwise the senators would’ve had a four-year term and wouldn’t have been up in 1991.
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Rick Sinding: I had never thought how that cycle would change things completely in the election immediately succeeding a census as opposed to the middle of the decade as it was in Kean’s time. Did you find that there were areas where you could work with the Republican majority, or did you find yourself constantly in the loyal opposition?

John Lynch: I had good rapport with Donald DiFrancesco and Gormley on a whole lot of them, but they pretty much had dug in their heels to do it their way. There were some issues. .. There were always issues that you could work with them on, but they were nuances rather than broad public policy. And otherwise we had no animosity, none of that and some of us were socially friendly. We just buried Jack Sinagra recently, who was probably my best friend in the Senate and a Republican.

Rick Sinding: A Republican from Middlesex County.

John Lynch: Yes, right.

Rick Sinding: You worked with Tom Kean. You worked with Jim Florio. You continued in office during Christie Whitman’s administration. You smile at that. Why?

John Lynch: Well, it was a difficult time.

Rick Sinding: Because...

John Lynch: I knew Governor Whitman as a freeholder and we had a pretty good rapport, but--

Rick Sinding: She was from neighboring Somerset County.

John Lynch: --I had a really serious problem with Peter Verniero from day one, and he was sort of running the show, I thought, and she didn’t want to get involved with too many issues. He preferred Atlantic City to...
Rick Sinding: He was her attorney general or was he her chief council?

John Lynch: He was her chief council originally, but then he sort of ran off anybody who was around her that he wanted to get rid of. He was a control guy. And then ultimately he self lined up to be attorney general when he had Deborah Poritz become chief justice and then moved himself over to the Supreme Court. He was orchestrating with a hope from day one.

Rick Sinding: And you had <inaudible> with him?

John Lynch: Yes, because he had not been around. He knew nothing about the intricacies of the state government, the relationships between a governor and the legislature, et cetera. And he was one of those that thought he knew everything but didn’t. As you know, we almost impeached him.

Rick Sinding: I didn’t recall that.

John Lynch: If Speaker Collins had posted the impeachment that the senate had voted he would’ve been getting impeached because there were more than enough votes in the assembly, but Collins said, "I’m not going to post it" after we had all the hearings with Michael Chertoff and the racial profiling, which is the genesis of the problem that Verniero had where he lied in his first appointment to the Supreme Court repeatedly and how he compartmentalized that issue to secure it. And ultimately the senate Republicans, majority of them, voted with the Democrats to vote for the impeachment so the assembly would finalize. And Collins said, "I’m not posting it," and they had more than enough votes. But he was a real issue, and Governor Whitman, she wasn’t really hands on. I’ll never forget when I had a cup of coffee, tea, whatever with her three years and three months into her term, and she says, “You know, I want to see if we can do some things together,” and I said, “Fine. You’ve got all this political capital now that uh.. you know, we’re rolling back taxes and you’re polling really well. You want to do some things that are good for the state structurally, et cetera, I’d be more than happy to help you provide votes.” Before the meeting was over it became clear that the only thing she wanted was us to take the initiative of getting rid of the prosecutor in Somerset County who had all kinds of problems.

Rick Sinding: Oh, yes. I remember.
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John Lynch: Nick Bissell. And that was all she was really interested in because they didn’t want her on their plate. They wanted somebody else to take the initiative.

Rick Sinding: There must’ve been some policy people in that administration that you dealt with.

John Lynch: Yes, there were, and don’t get me wrong. They had a few good people. But in terms of anything significant happening Verniero was running the show. He somehow had co-opted all that. He was the one that pushed Judy Shaw out.

Rick Sinding: She had been chief of staff and Whitman.

John Lynch: Chief of staff. Good gal. But he was very clever.

Rick Sinding: So it’s quite clear that you did not have a good relationship with Peter Verniero and with the front office of the Whitman administration and that your dealings with her were quite different from your dealings with Tom Kean and different again than your dealings with Jim Florio. How would you rate-- now, I don’t want to ask you to rate them in order of priority, but how would you differentiate the management styles of each of those three governors whose terms of office yours coincided with?

John Lynch: Don’t get me wrong. I like Jim Florio. I still like him. Kean had a more open approach, more user friendly. Some of it may be the fact that he was very astute politically, but he had this patrician veneer that people underestimated his political skills. But regardless of the reason he was easy to deal with. Jim probably had some people around that were all knowing, and that was the problem we had in the first year. It wasn’t Jim Florio. It was the fact there were some people there that were all knowing and thought they knew everything there was to know. They wouldn’t hear anything about downsides and problems and so forth, and that left a little bit of a bad taste. As you know, many times it has to do with staffing who are critical as well as the cabinet. But that’s the biggest issue that I’ve had in three administrations that I was there, Whitman, Florio, Kean. The difference in the style and talent and user friendliness of the staff and the commissioners was different. Some of them were actually funny. <laughs>
I’m just thinking out loud that one of the best lines I ever heard was—remember Buster Soaries, Reverend Soaries, secretary of state and then became the head of the election reform commission after the debacle in Florida 2001 Bush/Gore? And they created this new entity to look at all of this and create some uniformity in polling places and machines and all kinds of stuff. Well, Buster was secretary of state with Whitman and we had a reason to talk about this at one time, and he said, “I get embarrassed going to these cabinet meetings.” I said, <laughs> “What do you mean?” He said, “Well,” he said, “You know, you’re my friend, and we’ve been friends a long time.” He said, “I sort of hide under the table.” I said, “Why, because I’m public enemy number one?” He said, “No,” he said, “You’re public enemy number one and two.”

<laughter>

**John Lynch:** And, you know, we weren’t looking to cause them any difficulty. It was they had this business of they knew everything. And once they had put you in their crosshairs no matter where you went in that administration they would do this. You were blackballed. I’d never seen anything like that, certainly not in the Florio years, certainly not in the Kean years. So there’s a big difference in the feel for each administration, and it’s primarily because of the personalities and the level of talent. People that are of talent are not going to act that way like I experienced in the Whitman years.

**Rick Sinding:** When did you leave the legislature?

**John Lynch:** I left in January of 2002. McGreevey had just gotten elected.

**Rick Sinding:** Okay, and you were said to be a very, very important and forceful person in Jim McGreevey’s election and subsequently in his brief term of office. Is that a fair assessment?

**John Lynch:** That’s not a fair assessment. First of all, yes, I was close to McGreevey and I did help him a lot in ’97 and in 2001. I was misbranded as the power behind the throne so far as he was concerned between ’97 and 2001, and I had almost no role post election. It was a different ballgame. Frustrated by the policy, and McGreevey had a lot of talent, seemed to be well schooled, well versed, but didn’t want to lead. And I spent all my time talking about leading, you know. Do your homework. Talk to the legislature, do whatever, but call the shot. You can’t satisfy everybody every day of the week. So that turns out to be whoever got
in your ear last you’re moving this way and that way, and that turned out to be one of his biggest problems.

Rick Sinding: Is that right?

John Lynch: And so much so that if you said it publically, which I did, he would go crazy. It was hitting right in the soft spot.

Rick Sinding: You said that publically at the time?

John Lynch: Oh, yes.

Rick Sinding: Did that cause a falling out?

John Lynch: Well, it appeared in “The New York Times,” <laughs> so I got a phone call one morning and it was laden with invectives but I laughed.

<laughter>

John Lynch: I knew I hit home.

Rick Sinding: And you were not the power behind his throne. <laughs>

John Lynch: See, you’re not there to be loved. You’re there to be respected. You need to make decisions. You can't be satisfying everybody everywhere you go. And the Kean story I told you earlier. McGreevey would rather go to McDonald’s and meet eight people rather than go to the “Star-Ledger” editor and try to buy them into policy. There’s nothing wrong with wanting to meet those 8 people, but you can't do that 15 hours a day 7 days a week, which Jim was wanting to do.

Rick Sinding: What’s your impression of the current governor?

John Lynch: I’d rather not talk about the current governor.
Rick Sinding: And just one quick question perhaps to end it all. Speaking of the “Star-Ledger” editor he has not met once with the “Star-Ledger” editorial board in the four years that he’s been governor, and yet he got their endorsement. So is it as important these days to have that relationship with the editor of <inaudible>?

John Lynch: Well, it probably is not as important as it once was because of what’s gone on with the print media, but I suspect that’s very true, unlike 35 years ago, for sure. It may go to the fact that they have not been supportive of him in many ways, but they endorsed him because we’re a little shallow on our side of the ledger.

Rick Sinding: <laughs> That’s certainly what the editorial said, although it did raise a lot of eyebrows that they actually endorsed anyone.

John Lynch: You have to maintain some credibility, you know?

Rick Sinding: And with that let me thank you very much for coming in and for sharing your thoughts today.

John Lynch: Thanks, Rick.