



JIM GOODMAN

Donny D's First Pitch: Property Tax Relief

The day after George W. Bush was more or less elected to be president, Donald DiFrancesco was on television talking to the voters. He looked good, even decisive. You could almost see him sitting at the governor's desk instead of minding school in the state Senate.

Hey, he said, if you want to be a leader, you have to analyze the problems, decide what to do about them, and then do it. New Jersey's top problem, he proclaimed, was high property taxes. It was time, he declared, to give property owners some much needed tax relief - \$280 million worth - now.

The TV ads were taped long before election day, but must have been conceived at least with the possibility that the Republican governor of Texas would win, and that if he did, he might tap Whitman for an out-of-state job.

So for the five weeks when the country worried about pregnant chads and ballots butterflyed like fried shrimp, DiFrancesco began putting together the campaign he began dreaming up whenever people talked about making Whitman either a vice presidential candidate or a potential U.S. Senator.

When Whitman's political star had seemed destined for permanent burnout, DiFrancesco had faced the prospect of becoming state senator from Scotch Plains for life.

Now, however, George W. has rescued him. Disputed or not, Bush is president and Whitman can't wait to run the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Thanks to New Jersey's 1947 Constitution, that puts the Senate president (DiFrancesco) in the governor's seat.

What's the meaning if it all? For starters, Whitman couldn't get out of town at a better time. The state may be riding high but this is a gubernatorial election year. The funny thing is that Whitman has been elected governor twice but just barely. No matter how well she appears to be doing at the start of an election year, her support begins to fade as election day nears.

DiFrancesco worried that if McGreevey talked about high property taxes for the next nine months, New Jerseyans might vote Democratic.

Despite periods of her tenure when Whitman's popularity soared to 60 percent approval ratings, New Jersey voters never gave her more than 49 percent of the vote in her narrow wins over Democrats Jim Florio and Jim McGreevey.

Wins are wins but, still, Florio was the most unpopular governor in state history and McGreevey was only a nondescript mayor of Woodbridge.

DiFrancesco was Senate president but only beginning to emerge from the shadow of Garabed "Chuck" Haytaian who ran the Assembly and the state Legislature agenda until Whitman made him state GOP chairman.

Haytaian had been Whitman's go to guy in the Legislature. DiFrancesco was always reluctant to stick his neck out even when Whitman steamrolled the Legislature into erasing most of Gov. Florio's \$2.8 tax package by cutting the state income tax rate by 30 percent in two years.

After Whitman's win over McGreevey, DiFrancesco was asked how he planned to use the Senate presidency as a stopping stone to the 2001 gubernatorial nomination.

He would, DiFrancesco said, have to find a way to build a stronger and broader following among the voters than Whitman. The governor's inability to win 50 percent or more of the Vote in two elections showed that she failed to expand on the base that elected her in the first place.

For the Republicans to keep control of the state after Whitman, DiFrancesco asserted, a new Republican candidate for governor and the party itself will have to demonstrate that they care for the cities and the black and Hispanic people who live in those poverty ridden cities. In short, no Republican after Whitman will be elected governor unless he or she can persuade minorities and other urban citizens that he or she is on their side.

That was the Tom Kean formula for success. Elected by a razor thin plurality in 1981, Kean went to the people even at the expense of his own party in the legislature. Four years later, Kean rode an ocean of popularity to a record landslide reelection. New Jersey Republicans, DiFrancesco pointed out, have not fared well in statewide elections. They have not elected a U.S. senator since Clifford Case in 1972. And Case was a moderate. By today's standards, he would be to the left of Bill Clinton.

Bush's election does wonders for Whitman. She's escaping her last year in office-a period during which she would have been subjected to renewed and escalating attacks from Democrats.

Worse yet, chances are that DiFrancesco and Jersey City Mayor Bret Schundler would have campaigned for the GOP nomination by trying to persuade voters that they could make good on her alleged failure.

Whitman must have been thinking about what happened during Kean's last year in office. The economy during those final months of the Reagan-Bush era collapsed. The huge surge in state revenues that fueled Kean's popularity vanished. Florio wasn't around then so New Jersey Republicans blamed the national economy for the problems of which wore devastating the Northeast.

What will happen if the plush Clinton years go belly up under Bush? That will now be DiFrancesco's problem to deal with, not Whitman's. The initial reaction to DiFrancesco's assumption to the state's highest office is that it gives him real advantages over Schundler in the GOP spring primary. But it ain't necessarily so, no matter what the conventional wisdom tries to tell you. After nine years as Senate president, DiFrancesco remains the man who was almost at the top of New Jersey

politics but never quite sure what he would do if he got there.

Those November TV ads offer a clue. The state's number one problem, he asserted was property taxes. His prescription for a cure: more property tax rebates.

If nothing else, the ads raised tempers within the Whitman administration. "Why is Donny talking about property taxes," asked an exasperated Whitman staffer. None of the opinion polls, he argued, indicate that the voters are thinking about property taxes.

Maybe not, but as the old year ended, a Quinnipiac University poll indicated most New Jerseyans feel good about their state, except for high property taxes.

Clear message: Democrat McGreevey took an earlier poll and it too showed that property taxes can still irritate the electorate.

The strategy: If McGreevey talks about high property taxes for the next nine months' New Jerseyans will take the hint and vote Democrat.

True meaning: In the 11 years since Jim Florio was elected and decided he could solve New Jersey's education and property tax problems with a \$2.8 billion tax program, not much has really changed except the players.

Florio's taxes were supposed to put the voters at ease by taking more than \$2 billion in income taxes from the top 30 percent of the state's wealthiest citizens

SUBURBS

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flexibility, efficiency or technological progress. What endangers the public in the city is nothing less than what endangers all of society when the test of value becomes limited to market viability. Even the notion of public government itself is at risk when a document like the Clinton-Gore National Performance Review Report aimed at "reinventing government," entitled *From Red Tape to Results: Creating a Government That Works Better and Costs Less* (1993), draws its inspiration from the private transaction of retailer and customer: "Effective, entrepreneurial governments insist on customer satisfaction. They listen carefully to their customers—using surveys, focus groups, and the like. They restructure their basic operations to meet customers' needs. And they use market dynamics such as competition and customer service to create incentives that drive their employees to put customers first." Over the last half-



and redistributing it by the way Of state aide to poor and middle class school districts.

Few schemes have failed so miserably. The Republicans took over the Legislature and cut the state sales tax, which Florio had increased, back to 6 percent. To do that, they killed property tax rebates of up to \$500 for middle class property owners unless they happened to be senior citizens.

So now we have DiFrancesco making a pitch for property tax rebates his opening gambit for Election Year 2001.

The party line in 1991 was that local politicians, not state legislators, were to blame for high real estate taxes.

The difference in 2001 is that the still glowing economy is making it theoretically possible to give home owners a tax break without hiking state taxes.

If the economy goes bust, however, that's another story.

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Beginning in the 1960s, American courts all the way up to the Supreme Court struggled with the political consequences of having moved public life off the street into the privately owned shopping center. The ultimate outcome was that the First Amendment of the United States Constitution was ruled not to guarantee free access to shopping centers and it was left to the states to decide whether or not their own constitutions did. Only in six states, including New Jersey, have state supreme courts protected citizens' rights in privately owned shopping centers, and even in some of those states, New Jersey included, activity has been limited.

century, Americans' confidence that an economy and culture built around mass consumption could best deliver democracy and equality has led us from the Consumers' Republic to the consumerization of the republic. Advocates first for the postwar suburb, then the city, and now the nation itself have all come to judge the

public realm much like other purchased goods, by the personal benefit citizen-consumers derive from it. It seems only fitting that we have just witnessed a presidential campaign where a primary policy dispute is over which candidate's tax cut plan will put more spare change in the pockets of voters.