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Can McGreevey Rally Unruly Troops Astride His New Dark Horse Speaker?

As of November 6, Albio Sires was hard to pick out in a crowd, a one-term New Jersey legislator from a town that sounds like its on the wrong side of the Hudson. He was a low key kind of guy who liked to joke about not being able to find the bathrooms at the State House.

That all changed on January 8 when Sires, the Cuban born mayor of West New York, raised his right hand to take the oath of office as speaker of the New Jersey State Assembly.

That Jim McGreevey would gamble so much of his prestige on such a risky move within minutes of his acceptance speech as the newly elected governor speaks volumes about McGreevey. The governor-elect knows that he will either take control of the Democratic party and its feuding regional barons or be consumed by them.

Democrats have been out of power for a decade, enjoying the luxury of being part of the irresponsible minority, and they are not showing much interest in changing their ways now that a Democrat is getting ready to move into the governor's mansion.

Self discipline, a quality McGreevey obsessed over during two campaigns for governor, does not come easy to Democrats. It's anybody's guess whether McGreevey can pass on his self-taught trick to a Democratic party that makes a fetish of undiscipline.

But by dumping Joe Doria, Democratic leader of the Assembly in good times and bad for 12 years, McGreevey has sent a strong message to Democrats in both houses of the Legislature: To get through the first six months of the legislative calendar, the Democrats have to hang together from the top down.

If not, guess what?

The November elections have been viewed as a big win for the Democrats. They have a governor, control of the Assembly and a 20-20 split in the Senate. That's a lot of authority, but it is also the kind of power that can evaporate when the going gets rough.

Hand picking anyone as inexperienced

and untested as Sires to be his point man in the Assembly is a gamble for McGreevey. If it works—and the only test of that will be whether the Democrats are still in control of their destiny when New Jersey's 2002-2003 budget is signed into law—McGreevey will look like a summa cum laude graduate of Hogwart's Academy.

The downside of the Sires ploy is obvious. There is no reason to assume he can handle the job. And the choice embittered Doria who thought his leadership and fund raising skills had earned him the right to call the shots in the Assembly at least for the next two years.

At first glance, Sires looks like a pleasant, almost humble guy who was as surprised as anyone else that McGreevey picked him, almost it seemed, out of a hat. If he lacks the skills to preside over a

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potentially raucous Democratic caucus packed by legislators who consider him a neophyte, he is in for a very rough couple of months.

But there is also reason to think the McGreevey strategy might work.

To begin with, Doria has been the chief spokesman for the Democrats in the Assembly for 12 years. That's a lot of time and it includes the disastrous first six months of Jim Florio's only term. Everyone blames Florio for deciding in the Spring of 1990 that his administration could survive a \$2.8 billion tax program. There was, however, plenty of blame to go around. Doria, as Assembly speaker, and John

Lynch, as Senate president, share more of it than they have ever admitted.

In a scenario that reads eerily familiar today, Florio was elected in November of 1989 in a landslide vote that was bigger than McGreevey's recent win and brought with him solid Democratic control of both houses of the Legislature. Then, like now, the state was reeling from an economic downturn after years of boom and billion dollar budget surpluses. The budget surplus promised by outgoing Gov. Tom Kean began evaporating into what Florio called a \$1 billion deficit.

Even Kean's outgoing treasurer, Feather O'Connor, admitted things were going badly. There was a brief discussion between Florio's transition team and Kean's staff about a joint press conference in which the two governors would jointly announce that the state was in trouble and needed some kind of interim tax to ride out the troubled economy. Kean killed that idea and it wasn't until months later that anyone in the former Kean administration would admit there was even a hint of a joint tax agreement.

Sound familiar?

Florio, flush with victory, asked the Democratic legislators to find a tax plan that would keep the state going. Florio's idea was to pass a sales tax increase to balance the budget, let it take effect, and then a year or so later, find a way to increase the state income tax to meet the anticipated Supreme Court mandate to spend millions more on urban schools.

Doria balked. He was not going to commit Assembly Democrats to a plan in which they would pass two taxes: one, in the first six months of their terms; and a second in the following year—the year they would be running for re-election.

Whatever taxes were going to be passed, Doria declared, would be passed in one package. Senate President John Lynch agreed, arguing that the biggest problem before the state was property taxes. If the new taxes were not enough to ease the