

Donald Sico Interview (October 11, 2016)

Edited by: Kristoffer Shields

Rick Sinding: Hello. I am Rick Sinding. It's Tuesday, October 11, 2016, and we're here at the Eagleton Institute of Politics on the campus of Rutgers University. With me today for the Center on the American Governor is Don Sico who served as the longest-serving executive director in the history of the New Jersey General Assembly. From 1992 to 2002, he also served as chief of staff to two assembly Speakers. Before that he had been the communications director for the general assembly. We're here today to talk about largely but not exclusively the administration of Governor Jim Florio during which Don was effectively the spokesman for the loyal opposition. Don, welcome to Eagleton.

Don Sico: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Rick Sinding: Let's start at the beginning. Tell us a little bit about yourself, where you grew up, where you went to school, how you got involved in politics and what brought you to New Jersey.

Don Sico: Sure. I grew up on Long Island and I went to school in upstate New York at Oswego. Anybody who calls Chicago the Windy City has never been to Oswego, and I met my wife there and all the time I was growing up on Long Island I thought I wanted to move to Seattle; I had never been to Seattle. So we got married in 1976, we got in my car and we drove across to Seattle and we stayed there for nine days. It rained eight of those nine days. I said, "I'm not living here." We got back in the car and we came east and we stopped in Columbus, Ohio, where my brother was and we stayed with him for a while and I said, "Oh, why don't I look for a job?" So I had graduated with a degree in English writing arts; I majored in writing poetry. My poor mom thought I'd never find a job but I thought I wanted to be an advertising copywriter so I looked up all of the advertising firms in Columbus and there was one on Town Street and I went there and I went into the lobby and lo and behold they had moved. So I saw on the directory there was the Frontier Press and being a bright young man I said, "Well, they must need writers" so I went up to the Frontier Press, sat in the outer office. The president of the company came out and said, "What are you doing here, young man?" and I said, "I'm looking for a job" and he said, "Well, what do you do?" I said, "I'm a writer." He says, "Can you start Monday?" and I started working on the 1976 revision of the *Lincoln Library of Essential Information*, which is a two-volume set, and if you look at the 1977 edition actually you'll see my name as an editor. After we had finished the revision, I still thought I wanted to be an advertising copywriter so I answered an ad for a newspaper, *The Madison Press*, and I went out there and I met with the publisher.

Rick Sinding: Madison, Wisconsin?

Don Sico: I'm sorry. *The Madison Press*; it's 25 miles west of Columbus, it's a daily newspaper, and I met with the publisher and he looked at my resume and he said, "Well, you're not an advertising copywriter. You're a reporter. Can you start Monday?" This is a true story. So I became a reporter for *The Madison Press*. I did it for three years. I covered a state rep by the name of Bob McEwen who thought that I did a fair job. I didn't have a journalism background. I thought I was just reporting the facts but he thought I was fair to him and he asked me if I wanted to come work for the Correctional Institution Inspection Committee, which was a joint committee of the Ohio legislature. It had four senators, four representatives, four Republicans, four Democrats. Needless to say, we never got anything done but my job was to be grievance inspector. I visited all the prisons in Ohio and I met with prisoners and they told me their complaints. Now if you know anything about prisoners they have a lot of complaints and in fact a funny little story is I wrote that this one prisoner was a constant complainer. Well, he sued me in superior court in Ohio because he—his crime was that he had murdered his wife, cut her into little pieces and floated her down the Ohio River, but he was not a complainer so he sued me for defamation of character, but that got tossed out. So while I was there the state rep that asked me to come to work for the committee got elected to Congress and so in 1982 he asked me if I would come to Washington and be his press secretary and I did. So I went to Washington in 1982, was press secretary for a member of Congress from Ohio for 6 years. All the time he was gearing up to run for the U.S. Senate against Howard Metzenbaum in 1988. We did a spectacular announcement tour and on December 7, 1987, he announced that he was dropping out of the race because his wife told him that were he to lose that election he would also be losing her because she had grown fond of Washington and wasn't moving back to Ohio. We all scattered. I got a call from—

Rick Sinding: Losing a seat in Congress definitely doesn't necessarily mean you leave Washington.

Don Sico: Yeah. I don't know. That's the excuse they used. This was a little strange. So the AA that I had worked for had a relationship with Chuck Hardwick, who was Speaker of the New Jersey General Assembly, and Chuck Hardwick asked me if I would come to New Jersey and be his speechwriter. So I came on staff in 1988 to be speechwriter to Chuck Hardwick. He ran for governor—

Rick Sinding: He was certainly gearing up for a gubernatorial run—

Don Sico: Yes, exactly. That's why they were staffing up and so in 1989 when he ran for governor I became his communications director on the primary campaign. We finished third out of a five-person field. In the fall of 1989, the nominee, Jim Courter—his press secretary said some unfortunate things about gay people and

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had to resign from the race; they were really beyond the pale. And so Bob Franks—dearly departed Bob Franks, who was the Republican state chairman at the time, asked me if I would go to become Jim Courter’s press secretary during that gubernatorial general election because they wanted to keep the race close so they wouldn’t lose the general assembly and he said he would be with me every single day. “Don’t worry about it; just keep the race close.” Well, that was the last I heard from Bob Franks from the day I got that until the election, and as you know Governor Florio was elected in a landslide. As Republicans do, I lost two elections that year and when I got back to the office I got promoted. I became communications director of the assembly Republicans who did indeed lose the majority and went into the minority and [Chuck Haytaian](#) was the Republican leader of the caucus. During the time that I was on the campaign—some people remember this—the Republicans that remained in the assembly had figured out a way how to steal stuff from the Democrats’ computers and it blew into a big scandal called Computergate. Now I wasn’t there so I was off the hook. I don’t know how I would have reacted had I been given these documents, but there was a grand jury convened and the executive director of the assembly, a gentleman by the name of John Kohler, perjured himself before the grand jury. He resigned on September 17, 1990. The same day that he resigned I called Chuck Haytaian and I said, “Chuck, I want John’s job” and Chuck said these exact words to me—and you may have to edit this—he said, “You got a lot of balls to go asking for somebody’s job the same day they resign. I like that,” and he hired me on the spot. And I leapfrogged like six other people who were senior to me to become executive director of the Republicans in the general assembly. In 1991, we got—25 years ago this year—we got veto-proof majorities in both houses and I became executive director of the majority and I did that for ten years. The story I like to tell is that all of the great decisions in the State of New Jersey are made in that room behind where the governor has his press conferences, that conference room, and for ten straight years the only two constants in that room were two guys named Don, Don Sico and Don DiFrancesco. Governors changed, chief of staffs changed, assembly Speakers changed, but two guys named Don were constants.

Rick Sinding: Let’s go back to the Courter campaign because you came in under sort of the most difficult of circumstances, and this is the first that I’ve heard—although if I’d been paying closer attention perhaps I would have known—that as early as September of that year the Republicans were primarily concerned about making sure they didn’t lose control of both houses because the handwriting was on the wall in the gubernatorial race. Is that what you came into?

Don Sico: Yeah. So the polls at that time—I think the record shows that I took it from a 16-point deficit to a 23-point deficit.

Rick Sinding: And that was your doing of course.

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Don Sico: Yeah, of course, but it was uphill, it was difficult, and—but to this day—and he'll be 75 next week—Jim Courter and I remain good friends and he kept his head about him. And the story that I tell people that gave me an indication that we were going to have some difficulty during the campaign is we were riding around somewhere up in Passaic County. It wasn't Paterson but we were riding up there and it was dinnertime; we needed to find a place to eat. So I was in the back seat, his driver was driving, and he was in the passenger seat, and the two of them, the driver and Jim Courter, spent seven or eight minutes debating about where they were going to eat and then finally I said, "Just pick a place to eat. It doesn't matter where we eat." So it was that difficulty making decisions.

Rick Sinding: Do you tell that story as kind of an analogy to the way in which he ran his campaign or—

Don Sico: Yeah, that it was—

Rick Sinding: He was not a quick decision maker?

Don Sico: Yeah, he was democratic with a little 'd' and wanted to get a lot of input from a lot of people but when the time comes you need to make a decision.

Rick Sinding: People watching this in 2016 or reading it in 2016 or in years beyond will probably have some difficulty recognizing the fact that in 1989 politics even in New Jersey was a fairly civil affair. There were a lot of disagreements on policy between Florio and Courter but they had been colleagues in the house and there did not appear to be any personal animus between the two. When you were working with Courter did you have a feeling that you had to go tough after Florio, that that was the strategy that you'd employ, or was it a more civil issue-oriented campaign?

Don Sico: I'm in the minority on this issue as I am on so many issues but I'm in the minority on this issue. I think maybe politics has degenerated somewhat but I don't know that Republicans and Democrats, elected officials, those in the assembly, those in congress, those in the senate, are any less civil toward one another than they were—or a better way to put it, any more partisan than they were when I was there. I mean we went after each other tooth and nail. I mean I remember—I'm not proud of it at all but I remember that when I was executive director of the assembly and John Lynch was the senate president that he had had some unfortunate public flare-up with his wife, which should be out-of-bounds, and it made the front page of *The Trentonian*, which is a rag of a newspaper in Trenton, but anyway we took those front pages and we hung them all over the State House. Now that's pretty low in my opinion and in retrospect I probably wouldn't have done it as I've now matured but we were pretty partisan back then and I don't know that it's any more partisan now. We went after Governor Florio pretty hard. One of the

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reasons I was anxious to be here and to do this interview is that Governor Florio and I are now very, very good friends and I tell people that if all my political enemies of yesterday were my enemies today I would have no friends so—but we went after each other pretty hard. He tells the story when people that surround him say, “What are you doing hanging around Don Sico? Don’t you know he was the guy that went after you and blah blah blah?” He usually looks at them and says, “I got over it. Shouldn’t you?” I don’t know that it’s any less or more civil now. I mean I’m not there so I can’t really judge but from the time I started until the time I left it was about the same.

Rick Sinding: The 1989 election comes along. Your candidate, Jim Courter, has lost. Jim Florio comes in. There’s a whole wave of new Democrats who come into the assembly at the same time and in the first six months of that year the Florio administration did a whole bunch of things. A lot of auto insurance reform was the first step; a ban on assault weapons was the next; the Quality Education Act that changed the funding formula for schools; a whole series of activities, many of which became increasingly controversial. The question that arises in retrospect is how much of the groundswell of opposition that developed in the summer of 1990 was spontaneous and how much of it was fueled by the Republican minority recognizing that there would be political benefit from doing so?

Don Sico: Yeah. It’s funny you asked the question that way because as you were starting to ask it, I was thinking in terms of fire myself. We did not—unequivocally, we didn’t ignite that fire. We certainly benefited from it and we fed it.

Rick Sinding: A Billy Joel song, “We Didn’t Start the Fire.”

Don Sico: We didn’t start the fire but we—oh, we fed it as much as we could. We developed relationships with—stronger relationships—we already had existing relationships but stronger relationships with the sportsmen—we call them the sportsmen—the NRA. But in New Jersey, actually the stronger coalition is the New Jersey Coalition of Sportsmen. We didn’t have any relationship whatsoever with the NJEA and the NJEA was very upset about the Quality Education Act and all of its iterations.

Rick Sinding: Specifically, about funding of pensions.

Don Sico: Exactly.

Rick Sinding: Interestingly enough, as we look at this twenty years later.

Don Sico: And that issue was simply that—in retrospect it was probably the right thing to do and it didn’t get done and I don’t know that it can ever get done—but that issue was local governments, which are responsible for the amount of the

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pension by virtue of the salaries they give teachers, should be responsible for paying the pensions. That's what that issue was, but the NJEA wisely understood that doing so would mean that they wouldn't get as much in the way of pensions or in the way of salary increases, but it would have certainly tamped down property taxes, which was its intent. So we did not have that relationship but we developed a very strong relationship through Chuck Haytaian primarily with the teachers and Jack Collins who was a teacher at Glassboro at the time and I think was a member of the faculty union, whatever that faculty union was at Glassboro. And then Hands Across New Jersey, that just—I don't know where it came from. I'm not sure how it got started but we certainly during that summer were able to—I don't want to say infiltrate—but would make relationships there and assist them with giving them information and that kind of stuff. It all came to a head, and you may recall that—Channel Nine was a bigger player than it is now, decided that they were going to give Governor Florio the opportunity to explain the tax increases and some of the other stuff on a prime time telecast but they also gave Republicans the opportunity to respond. And so we—it came to a head and I wrote Chuck Haytaian—I think it was one of the reasons that he said yes when I asked him for the job but I wrote that speech for Chuck Haytaian and by most accounts we did a better job explaining our position than Governor Florio did in explaining his position.

Rick Sinding: Let's go back a little bit to maybe some policy questions about the Florio administration initiatives, the auto insurance reform, the assault weapons ban and the QEA budgets and taxes. To what extent if any was there input from the Republican side on these?

Don Sico: A good question. I don't know that there was any attempt made whatsoever to kind of make these efforts bipartisan. I'd have to go back and look at the votes to see if there were. Well, I certainly know that the tax increases there weren't any Republican votes. My guess would be that there weren't any Republican votes on the QEA. On the assault weapons—

Rick Sinding: There was Bill Gormley on the assault weapons—

Don Sico: On the assault weapons you had Bill Gormley, but on the auto insurance thing there may have been Republican votes. I don't remember that being actually as controversial as some of the other things. There was also what we called dirty water—the Clean Water Act.

Rick Sinding: Clean Water Enforcement.

Don Sico: Clean Water Enforcement Act and that might have been—my guess would be that Maureen Ogden and Rod Frelinghuysen and some others voted for that.

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Rick Sinding: And I guess there was also the appointment of the first environmental prosecutor and I think that was probably a fairly bipartisan effort. Those were very early issues and not as controversial obviously as the ones that followed, but my recollection—and correct me if I’m wrong—there was certainly no Mitch McConnell-like statement at the beginning of the Florio administration that the primary concern or interest in the Republican minority was making Jim Florio a one-term governor.

Don Sico: No.

Rick Sinding: But I guess you could say that what happened was that the Democratic majorities in both houses were so large that the Florio administration didn’t feel as though it needed to reach out or didn’t feel as though there would be any point in doing it. Was that your impression?

Don Sico: I don’t really know the answer. I mean we reacted to things as they happened and as it became clear to us in the summer of 1990, I guess it was, that things weren’t going well for Governor Florio politically, our sole focus was on the 1991 election and what we could do to regain them. Remember we had just been in the majority in the assembly and had just lost it and we were hell-bent on regaining our majority and that was our focus. In fact, I remember one of the things that I instituted was when I became executive director in the spring of 1991 Governor Florio’s poll numbers were beginning to improve, and so we did an effort we called Drive to July and the sole purpose of that drive was to reduce his poll numbers and get him back to where we could be successful electorally and we didn’t do anything—It wasn’t a political campaign so it was perfectly—remember we were very mindful of not doing anything on state time that could smack of electoral politics. Of course, we had just gone through that grand jury on Computergate which looked into that issue but it was a public-relations effort on the issues. I mean we reminded people about the Quality Education Act and the tax increases and everything else and then you may also recall at the time that the economy was in the dumper and—

Rick Sinding: Jim Florio would certainly remind everybody of that at every opportunity.

Don Sico: Yeah, and—but that wasn’t his fault.

Rick Sinding: I’m curious about your point about the Quality Education Act, going back to the reason that the NJEA had opposed it, because you suggest in retrospect at least that shifting the pension burden over from the state to the local school district—not that they would necessarily have to pay for it but that it would count against their cap for the purposes of state aid would have from a fiscal-responsibility standpoint been the right thing to do. Was there any sense in the

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Republican caucus that that actually would be the right thing to do? Was there any movement on the part of any Republicans to say, "That's probably a good idea. We ought to do it"?

Don Sico: Yeah, well, we have some pretty conservative members as you might expect. When you have a smaller caucus it tends to get more conservative and so yeah, there was some voice that this would—well, that it would have its desired effect and the desired effect was to stop the double-digit rapidly increasing property-tax increases that we were seeing all across the state of New Jersey and there were some in our caucus who believed it would do that, but that's different than pulling the lever and voting for it.

Rick Sinding: I think this is a very interesting juxtaposition of public policy versus politics, that if there was sentiment in the caucus for supporting this from a policy standpoint at the same time it was quite clear that this was not a very popular thing to do and so you could take advantage of that by being opposed to it. Is that what it comes down to?

Don Sico: Well, we had a pretty strict rule and it's different now because when you have slim majorities—so I believe that when we were in the minority it was 44-36 so there were 44 Democrats and 36 Republicans. Our rule was that we wouldn't give them a single vote on virtually anything, you know, on National Daffodil Day, unless they could get 41 on their own.

Rick Sinding: That's the Hastert Rule.

Don Sico: Yeah, that's the burden of the majority, you need to come to 41 on your own, but on the more controversial stuff we had a 90 percent rule in caucus and the 90 percent rule was that if 90 percent of those in caucus wanted to vote one way—and we didn't do it on every issue obviously; it was for the larger, more important issues—everybody was bound by that 90 percent rule. And as you may or may not recall there were two members of our caucus who broke that party-position rule and—Jeff Moran and Chris Connors who is now a senator—and they were punished in our caucus. The punishment was—to this day Jeff will tell me that it was a worse punishment than anything else we could have done to them—we moved their seats to sit with the Democrats in the assembly chamber.

Rick Sinding: Somebody's seats had to be moved that way anyway since they're divided fifty-fifty.

Don Sico: Yes.

Rick Sinding: Ok. The summer of 1990, 101.5 comes on the air, wants to be the voice of New Jersey. The Hands Across New Jersey movement springs up as a

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grassroots movement but then it quickly, quickly gains a pretty tremendous backing. And one of the things that has come to light much more recently was the extent to which the NRA was actively involved—

Don Sico: No question.

Rick Sinding: —in financing that. Did you know that at the time?

Don Sico: I didn't know it at the beginning but by the time the election rolled around in November of 1991 I knew it. I knew they were at least providing bodies and that a lot of the protestors, a lot of the Hands Across New Jersey people, were indeed sportsmen who were upset about the assault-weapons vote, but I didn't know that they were supporting them financially until later on. And no question that they assisted tremendously in that Hands Across New Jersey effort. It's maybe 60 percent of the effort that it was without the sportsmen.

Rick Sinding: Some people have suggested that the Hands Across New Jersey movement was a forerunner of the Tea Party. Do you think there are some similarities there?

Don Sico: I don't know. There's so much time in between when the Tea Party—I mean you could use it as an example but I don't know that it was the same kind of protest that the Tea Party was, because the Tea Party I guess came in President Obama's first year, which would have been what, 2009, and Hands Across New Jersey was 1990 and so there's so much time in between. I don't know that it's the same and the Tea Party's certainly lasted longer unfortunately or fortunately depending upon your point of view.

Rick Sinding: I'll ask you to sort of put on a different hat now. At this point in 1990, 1991, you had become something of a seasoned operative in the Republican Party. You sort of knew your way around politics and public policy, the State House in Trenton. If you had been on the other side, if you had been advising Jim Florio during or immediately after those first six months, what would you have told him to do that you thought he should have done differently?

Don Sico: Well, one of—I discussed this topic fairly frequently because one of my best friends in the world was Joe Salema who was Governor Florio's chief of staff and—but he was not there for the very beginning.

Rick Sinding: Not for the first six months.

Don Sico: Yes, and so we talk about what should have been done differently and the first thing is that one of the really foolish decisions that was made was to have Doug Berman, who was the treasurer, become every single cabinet officer during the budget discussions. So if folks aren't aware, when the legislature's considering

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the budget each cabinet officer has to come before the appropriations committees in the senate and the assembly and justify the expenditures. The reason given was that the cabinet officers weren't up to speed yet, it was the first six months, and so Doug was up to speed on the budget, Treasurer Berman, and so he would be the one—he became the DEP commissioner, the corrections commissioner, every single one, he testified, and it really made the governor and the governor's office look foolish in a lot of folks' opinion. So that probably should have been done differently.

Rick Sinding: I should point out too, not to interrupt, but that one of the reasons that commissioners do testify particularly in the early stages is to get to know the legislators one on one and to establish their own relationships with friendly legislators even if they're of the other party.

Don Sico: Yes, and there was a political decision made—so there's politics on both sides—but there was a political decision made by the Florio administration that there are all of these heavy lifts we have to undertake, the assault-weapons ban, fixing the education system, increasing the taxes and getting the budget straight, auto insurance to a lesser extent, the Clean Water Enforcement Act and probably a few others that I'm leaving out. Let's get them all over with at once. And so let's increase all the taxes we need to increase all at once and get it all done so that by the time the election rolls around again we'll be in fairly good shape and we won't have to—people will have forgotten about it. It was too much.

Rick Sinding: That was definitely the calculation; there's no question about that.

Don Sico: Yeah, and it was too much for—it was too much too soon and folks just said, "Stop already."

Rick Sinding: Would your advice have been "Just take it slower. Don't take on as many issues in the first six months as you did"?

Don Sico: In the first six months definitely. Do the relatively easy ones.

Rick Sinding: Auto insurance, clean water enforcement—

Don Sico: Yeah, but there was—and you had a constitutional deadline with regards to the budget and taxes so it became necessary to do some tax increases. I don't know that they needed to do all of those tax increases but remember some of them were education-related so you could change the education system at some other point in time and do that tax—I think the income-tax increase was going back into education.

Rick Sinding: You had to by law, by constitution.

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Don Sico: By constitution, but you know, it's all fungible. <laughs> But the other thing I would have done—and this was Governor Florio's decision personally so he made the decision and he had to live with it. I don't know that it was necessary to do the assault-weapons ban in the first wave of things. It was something that was very important and so don't misunderstand me and it was something near and dear to his heart and something that he believed would save lives.

Rick Sinding: To this day, I think it's the thing of which he is most proud.

Don Sico: Yeah, so I don't know that even if—I think he would sacrifice the governorship, which a lot of people would say he did, by doing it that way all over again, but I think if that one change had been made—so you did the assault-weapon ban in your second term rather than in your first term, you didn't become the first state but maybe you became the third state, then things would have turned out differently.

Rick Sinding: One of the distinctions between Jim Florio and Tom Kean, his predecessor, was sort of the common wisdom I would say that Tom Kean got dragged kicking and screaming into raising taxes and Jim Florio appeared to do it with some relish. Do you think that's a fair assessment?

Don Sico: I don't think it's totally fair. I don't know that Governor Florio relished increasing taxes. I think he did his good mental health and convinced himself that it was most definitely the right thing to do and so he had that confidence about him with regards to the tax increases, but I don't know that he enjoyed raising taxes. I don't know that anybody enjoys raising taxes. We all pay them so even if you believe that taxes need to be increased to pay for some good public policy or a good social program because you pay them you never enjoy them.

Rick Sinding: Do you think that without 101.5 there would not have been the level of opposition that rose, the public outcry that occurred and lasted as long as it did?

Don Sico: It's hard to know which piece would have survived without the other pieces, so they're all interconnected: 101.5, Hands Across New Jersey, the sportsmen, the NJEA. That's probably the four main components and the Republicans to be there and it's hard to know which would have survived without the other. Certainly, 101.5 gave voice to it but to this day I couldn't tell you what their listenership was. I couldn't imagine it would be any more than 25, 30 percent of the people of the state of New Jersey listening to it. I mean after all it was a radio program.

Rick Sinding: I would think that's a very high assessment.

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Don Sico: Yeah. But it gave some voice and on top of that it got some earned media coverage by *The Record* and *The Ledger* and some of the other newspapers.

Rick Sinding: Just to bring it up to date, one of the interesting things it seems to me is that even as we speak there has just been a significant vote in the New Jersey legislature to raise the gas tax after years and years of discussion of this. There were a bunch of trade-offs involved in this and 101.5 was again directing or leading the charge against this.

Don Sico: Bill Spadea.

Rick Sinding: But you don't see nearly the level of opposition arising out of this. You hear it and you see some media, you hear a lot of grumbling, but it doesn't look as though this is going to be of any lasting consequence in terms of the political fallout the way this was 20, 25 years ago in the Florio administration.

Don Sico: Yeah. I think that's because you can see the need for it and I think the state of New Jersey actually justified the need for expending funds for improving their roads in a positive way by widening the turnpike. That was a miserable mess for a long time and now it's almost—it's not a joy because it's never a joy to drive in my opinion but it's almost a joy to get from one point to the other on the New Jersey Turnpike now since they did that widening. So people can see that if you make the investment that there is some benefit to them personally and so I think the gas-tax increase there whether it's 23 cents, a nickel, 50 cents, whatever it is, I don't think those numbers really matter that much to tell you the truth and they probably could have increased it even more. I think they can see and so it's not—the people are always upset about some kind of taxes and I've heard people say that we don't have a lot going for us here in New Jersey, the one thing we do have going for us is low gasoline prices and we don't have to pump our own gas, why are we changing that, but other than—it's an example and it's interesting you raised that. There was significant Republican support primarily in the assembly but a little bit in the senate too for that and that's—when I was there we would have never given the majority party any votes for that kind of increase; we would have just made them do it on their own. So some people in my party are questioning the wisdom of the Republican leadership in the legislature. They're in fairly extreme minorities and don't really see a way out. Providing votes for that tax increase some people think was a political mistake, not necessarily a policy mistake because I've already said that it was probably the right thing to do, but a political mistake.

Rick Sinding: Interesting though that a gasoline-tax increase—although I think it's probably largely overlooked that a lot of this is going to end up being paid by out-of-state drivers—that still it would hit pretty hard across the board at everybody who drives in New Jersey. Going back to the Florio administration, the one percent on the sales tax was going to hit everybody but then the rest of it was all aimed at

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the top five percent or top ten percent at the top of the income-tax scale and that something like 85 or 90 percent of taxpayers would end up not paying any additional money. That does not seem to enter the equation in a situation like this?

Don Sico: One of the differences is that the Florio tax increases had some pretty heavy-duty symbolism—so the paper-products tax, so maybe if there was one tax that—and it didn't really rate;, I think it was \$60 million;, I forget the exact number, maybe even less than that—if there was one part of that sales tax increase that they probably should have eliminated, it was that because it provided a symbolism. People were walking around with toilet paper—

Rick Sinding: And throwing them through the second-floor window of the State House.

Don Sico: And so I think the gasoline tax is just a little easier for folks to—everybody rides the roads and it goes to fund transit. We had that horrible accident in Hoboken and so hopefully some of these monies will be expended to make our trains safer. So I don't know. I think there's a fuller understanding of a gas-tax increase than there are with broader-based taxes which go to—the other part of it is with a broader-based tax you can always find a target for that money that people don't agree with. So government spends on all sorts of things and there's always something that you can point to, "See, they're raising your taxes so they can spend it on blank," and you can't do that with a gas-tax increase.

Rick Sinding: You're now into 1991. You're going to the fall, the election of both the new assembly and senate because of the peculiarity in New Jersey's law that says that the assembly and senate both have to be up at the same time—sometimes every two years, sometimes every four years depending upon when the census has taken place. Nineteen ninety-one was one where you had both houses up at the same time. You must have been pretty confident going into the '91 election.

Don Sico: We became more confident in the spring and early summer of that year when through the redistricting process—so the census occurred in 1990 and in the spring of and early summer of 1991 we redrew the maps for the state of New Jersey. I guess it would have been in the winter and spring of 1991 because it had to be done by the time of the filing deadline. We drew a very favorable map and the tie-breaker voted with us.

Rick Sinding: Was that Alan Rosenthal?

Don Sico: It wasn't Alan. It was—

Rick Sinding: Here at Eagleton we—

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Don Sico: No. It was—John Stokes from Princeton. Right?

Rick Sinding: Right. The dean of the Woodrow Wilson School.

Don Sico: Yes, from the Woodrow Wilson School, and he voted with us and the map was far more favorable to us than the map that exists today or the map that existed prior, so after we saw that map—and we became competitive in areas we had no business being competitive in and in fact we took a senate and an assembly seat in the city of Trenton because we had some of the suburbs that were in those districts. We took the city of Passaic.

Rick Sinding: You think that was largely a function of redistricting?

Don Sico: I think it contributed to it. I think without the combination of the tax increases and the anger about Governor Florio—without that we'd probably get—we still would have taken the majority in my opinion, probably would have had 48 seats or 45 to 48 but—

Rick Sinding: Instead—

Don Sico: —we got 50 seats.

Rick Sinding: You got veto-proof majorities in both houses. That puts you in a completely different situation. You in effect have joint responsibility for the running of government. How does that change the dynamic between the assembly and senate leadership and the front office when Jim Florio is down the hall and your Republican majority now has control of the legislature?

Don Sico: It didn't change immediately and we had to remind Governor Florio and his staff repeatedly that we were "co-governing" the state of New Jersey and we did so by overriding Governor Florio in—just in the assembly 19 times, and it wasn't until Bob DeCotiis became his chief counsel—and Bob tells me that he went in there and said, "Listen. They're overriding us anyway and the stuff is becoming law. Why don't we just talk to them and see what they want and agree with them?" Because up until that time they really weren't consulting us on—even though we had majorities, they really weren't consulting us and so it took repeated reminders. And then after that I think it was one of the glory times in New Jersey governance, the Florio administration and the Republican legislature. We got an awful lot done from, let's say the summer of '92, it would have been then until the reelection and even the lame duck session.

Rick Sinding: Primarily in terms of economic development.

Don Sico: Yes.

Rick Sinding: And also welfare reform.

Don Sico: So a lot got done and [Brenda \[Bacon\]](#)—not just welfare reform, Medicaid managed care. We did a lot and a lot of good came out of it because we started talking to one another and getting along. In fact, it's almost phenomenal to think of but I cannot remember a single time when I was executive director and Bob DeCotiis was chief counsel that I called over to his office for whatever it was, and that would have been eight, nine, ten times a week, that he didn't get on the phone—not "take a message, get right back to you," but get on the phone. And I said that to Joe Salema one time, that it was amazing to me that he did that, and Joe said, "That's because he didn't do anything else." <laughs>

Rick Sinding: Other than deal with you or other than talk on the—

Don Sico: Dealing with the legislature, yes.

Rick Sinding: That's primarily the chief counsel's job, right, is to work with the legislature to advance the administration's initiatives?

Don Sico: And it worked rather well.

Rick Sinding: Chuck Haytaian was a tough customer, as the quote that you used from him illustrates. He was never a big fan either of the Florio administration or what the Florio administration stood for in terms of policy. Don DiFrancesco was different.

Don Sico: He was a senator.

Rick Sinding: Is that the difference?

Don Sico: The difference is—yeah. Well, senators are more used to power. I'm not going to say that they use it better but they're more used to power because they all have individual power. Each senator has this thing called courtesy where they can decide who gets a position and who doesn't get a position. The assembly people don't have that so senators are kind of kingdoms unto themselves and I think when you have that and you're used to it, it makes you more willing to compromise than when you just get it overnight. I remember we went to Drumthwacket when we had decided that we were going to cut the sales tax back from seven to six percent—Governor Florio had raised it from six to seven—and we were getting ready to override him and Chuck Haytaian leaned forward and said, "Governor, why don't you just sign the sales-tax increase? You'll be a hero. You can admit that you made a mistake." Because the writing was on the wall then; we had already won the veto-proof majorities. And Governor Florio looked at him and said, "Is that your form of Russian roulette?" and so the relationship—like I said we had to remind him—we were the only legislature in the history of the state of New Jersey to

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override a total budget of the governor. He vetoed the entire budget, which we think actually made it easier on us. We didn't have to have vote after vote after vote on line items, but—and then after that things changed and they changed I think for the better.

Rick Sinding: Was that the decisive vote, the override of the budget?

Don Sico: Yes, it certainly was.

Rick Sinding: And that would have been in June of '92.

Don Sico: Correct

Rick Sinding: The first six months of the Republican assembly and senate majorities were a rocky time in terms of the relationship between—

Don Sico: Yeah, and we were still—

Rick Sinding: —the legislature and the governor.

Don Sico: —getting our sea legs under us. We didn't really know fully what our powers were and what we could do so we sought counsel wherever we could get it so when we—when Governor Florio vetoed the budget, we consulted with and brought them—I remember the meeting—we consulted with and brought into our caucus—not our caucus, our leadership, I'm sorry—we brought Alan Karcher, former Speaker—Democratic Speaker, who had—there was no love lost between him and Governor Florio anyway—

Rick Sinding: They had run against one another in '89 I should point out.

Don Sico: — and Cary Edwards, chief counsel to Governor Kean, and they came in and they gave us advice. And in fact I think both of them predicted that—so this was before he had decided what he was going to do; I was mistaken. They both said that he would never veto the entire budget and that we should get prepared to do line-item-veto overrides. But then he vetoed the entire budget.

Rick Sinding: This reminds me that I should ask Governor Florio the next time I see him why he vetoed the entire budget instead of line-iteming it. That's interesting.

Don Sico: Yeah, I think that question was asked at a [panel discussion](#) we had here at Eagleton and Jon Shure explained it but I don't remember how Jon Shure explained it because I think Chuck Haytaian actually raised that issue at that panel discussion.

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Rick Sinding: How did your now veto-proof majority get along with or deal with the leadership of the minority? Was there any relationship there?

Don Sico: I think that was a pretty solid relationship and I think that was borne out of the fact that the person who was leading the—at least in the assembly the person who was leading that caucus was [Joe Doria](#) who's just a sweetheart of a man, a very smart man, a shrewd politician, and he and Chuck Haytaian had a great relationship. They met at least once a week and Joe would tell him what his needs were with regards to staff and that kind of thing and bills, and we also—very early on we instituted a percentage rule so whatever percent that the Democrats had as a percentage of the 80-member assembly they would get that percentage of bills on the board list for the voting session. So as their numbers grew, which they did unfortunately in succeeding elections, the percentage of bills that they got on the board—and we held to that and we also instituted—I don't know that they do it to this day but I instituted a kind of a formula with regards to the number of members they have and the number of staff they would have.

Rick Sinding: Let's talk a little bit about the initiatives. I know there were several in terms of economic development but you mentioned the Medicaid managed care. I interviewed [Amy Mansue](#) recently who I think was involved in the development of a lot of that as was Brenda Bacon certainly as the governor's chief healthcare-policy adviser. How did that come about? Was it an initiative of the administration and did the members in the legislature work with the administration in carving out the language of the bill? This must have been a tremendous amount of give and take and a lot of technical detail.

Don Sico: Definitely an administration initiative. The brainpower, the creative power in Governor Florio's policy shop, I don't think has ever been surpassed particularly when it comes to healthcare so remember—

Rick Sinding: I'll take that as a compliment.

Don Sico: Yeah. Well—

Rick Sinding: Having spent a year there.

Don Sico: Yeah. Well, remember with regards to healthcare you had—think about where they are now too. You had Brenda Bacon, you had Amy Ryan—

Rick Sinding: Amy Mansue.

Don Sico: Amy Mansue and Amy Ryan.

Rick Sinding: And Betsy Ryan.

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Don Sico: Betsy Ryan. Amy Ryan's an actress. Betsy Ryan and—president of the New Jersey Hospital Association, senior VP, president at RWJ hospitals, and Brenda Bacon who's one of the largest nursing-home operators in the entire country, and you had all three of them in one policy shop. And then you had—on our side you had people in the insurance and healthcare sector who actually understood these things so you had Doc Coburn who was a physician who was chairing our health committee. On the insurance side, you had Gerry Cardinale who didn't come from the insurance industry but knew a lot about it.

Rick Sinding: He was a dentist.

Don Sico: Yeah, but was doing it for so long so understood the health-insurance side of it and quite honestly we got a lot of help and advice, and people may say what they want about lobbyists but the one thing that lobbyists do that's beneficial is they provide information and policy thought and innovation and ideas and we got a lot of that from BIA and from the hospital association and others. And so it was really a collaborative effort and it was good for everybody I think. I mean it not only saved money but it got more people better benefits and so—I don't know.

Rick Sinding: And welfare reform became a model for the Clinton administration to put together in Washington. A lot of people talk about the role that Wayne Bryant played in welfare reform but again it was a veto-proof Republican legislature that passed the bill. How did that all develop?

Don Sico: I don't know that it could have happened without Wayne Bryant. I mean you couldn't—I think politically it would have been very difficult for—I'll be politically incorrect—for white suburban legislators to push something that primarily affected inner-city minorities. And so when Senator Bryant was willing to champion that cause—

Rick Sinding: He represented Camden in the—

Don Sico: Yeah. It gave legislators at least the cover that they needed to make this change and as you said it was a change that was modeled nationally by the Clinton administration.

Rick Sinding: It's interesting. You have the first two years of the administration and coming from your perspective the Florio administration was essentially was driven by the executive branch. Because of much of what it did was unpopular, now you come into the second half of the administration in which there are veto-proof majorities in both houses and suddenly there is this—I wouldn't call it a model of decorum, but you have significant pieces of legislation that are passed and as you said after those first six months there were really, really major initiatives undertaken that were the result of this bipartisan effort. Why didn't that happen in

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Washington? Why did after the first two years of the Obama administration during which the Democrats had control of both houses and then as we get to the second half of the Obama administration everything falls apart?

Don Sico: All right. Let me answer that question first by explaining a little bit further what happened during our second two years. So the difference between the first two years and the second two years of the Florio administration was during the first two years they were telling the legislature what to do and during the second two years they were asking the legislature whether these things can be done, but during all four years most of the initiatives were still coming from the administration as they do with almost any administration, at least in New Jersey.

Rick Sinding: Especially in New Jersey.

Don Sico: Yeah. There were some initiatives that came out of the legislature but most of them came out of the administration. So during those second two years when they were asking we said, "That sounds like a good idea but why don't we do it this way?" or "What about this idea?" It was more of a conversation. I think two things happened in Washington and I'm not in Washington so I'm allowed to have whatever opinion I want. The first is that the Republican caucus splintered and so it became a very—John Boehner probably will write a book; he hasn't written it yet—but it became a very difficult caucus to manage because in order to manage a caucus you have to be able to provide those majority votes. So in the—you have to have 217 or 218, whatever it is, votes that you can rely on in order to get things done; John couldn't do that. The second part was I don't know that President Obama—and I don't know the man—but I don't know that he had a healthy respect for the legislative body, for Congress. I don't know that he went out of his way and people—Congressmen tell me this—remember there were a bunch serving who were in the assembly so I have relationships there—that he doesn't—he hasn't really reached across the aisle; he hasn't called them to the White House and said, "Hey, let's talk about this and blah blah blah" so I don't know that he made as much of an effort as he could. And then finally what happened is the Republicans decided "Well, the heck with you. We're going to do everything we can to first try to defeat you at your reelect and then try to make your second term as miserable as possible," but I think it started with two things. One was the splintering of the Republican caucus and two, Obama not doing enough outreach. I mean if you think even about the Affordable Care Act, if you can't get Olympia Snowe or Susan Collins to vote for your proposal when you're a Democratic President and looking for Republican votes you're not trying hard enough. And you can get some of those progressive Republicans that were serving in the Senate to vote for virtually anything if you try hard enough, and when I saw that neither Olympia Snowe or Susan Collins was voting for the Affordable Care Act I'm like, "They couldn't have tried very hard."

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Rick Sinding: There was no splintering in the Republican caucus in New Jersey after the 1991 election.

Don Sico: Chuck Haytaian would never allow that. <laughs> No. Well, there were the votes that—the two members from Ocean County that tried and did not succeed. <laughs>

Rick Sinding: In 1993, we now have a pitched battle for the governorship between Jim Florio and Christie Whitman. What role did you play at that point?

Don Sico: I was a campaign consultant, unpaid of course, and in fact—I don't know that I've ever told this story. I was the one, with a member of my staff, who spent hours and hours and hours going through both audio- and videotapes to find the one moment when Governor Florio said during his 1989 campaign that he wouldn't increase taxes. And then that became the centerpiece of Governor Whitman's ads against Governor Florio, not so much that he had increased the taxes—even though people were still upset about that—but that he had lied about it.

Rick Sinding: That's an interesting characterization, that he lied about it.

Don Sico: Well, I'm saying that was the campaign's characterization. I'm not saying that he lied about it because my argument and his argument would be that circumstances changed, but in a campaign you don't explain the other side's point of view. <laughs>

Rick Sinding: I understand, but this does raise an interesting question that I've asked a lot of people. It has been speculated by a lot of people that what you have to say in order to get elected is frequently—if it comes back to haunt you in this way—is what makes it almost impossible to govern once you've been elected. Do you buy into that?

Don Sico: I do, but I don't like it at all and my response to it—because I hear it so often—is “Are these jobs really that great? Really? So being an assembly member, being a senator, being a congressman, being a U.S. Senator or even being President, are these jobs so wonderful that you need to change who you are and lie about what you—lie or massage what you feel about things in order to get the job?” I mean I remember—and I'll definitely leave the names out of this but I remember one assembly member who got elected and he was doing the bidding of his boss, the person who got him the job, a county chairman. And Jack Collins, who succeeded Chuck Haytaian as Speaker looked over at me and said, “Why would you work that hard to get a job and then when you got it, it wasn't really yours at all?” So I don't know. I don't think they're that great of jobs. I don't know that we'll ever get to this but I would rather have folks run for office, tell the truth and lose than

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folks run for office, tell me what I want to hear and then get in there and do something opposite. As a Republican, I get way more upset at Republicans who don't—once they get there who change their position on issues that are important to me than I do Democrats. I expect Democrats to be in opposition to my point of view. I mean, that's why they're Democrats and I'm a Republican. But when Republicans do that it upsets me no end because they said something different when they were running.

Rick Sinding: Now Christie Whitman gets in and you're still the executive director of the assembly majority and now you slash the income tax.

Don Sico: Because she promised to.

Rick Sinding: Which she promised to do and there's this pension issue that arises.

Don Sico: Not the first six months though I don't think, the pension issue. I mean was it the second year, not the second term but the second—

Rick Sinding: No, within her first term.

Don Sico: First term. Yes, okay, I was just trying to—but before we do that can we back up? So when Governor Florio lost there was this transition and I've become—

Rick Sinding: I was actually going to get back to that but—

Don Sico: Oh, okay, but yeah, I was just doing it chronologically.

Rick Sinding: Okay. Let's stay there.

Don Sico: So there was this transition and I remember very clearly—and I have a lot of thoughts about transition. So [Judy Shaw](#) was one of the heads of Governor Whitman's transition team and so Chuck Haytaian and I would go over to those offices—I think it was 50 West State Street—and we would meet with them fairly frequently, at least once a day during that transition period. And so the one thing we made clear to them—there are two roles to transition. There's a policy direction that you want to try to fill out, more than what you said during the campaign, and then there's personnel direction where you have to hire cabinet officers and other staff. I actually think those two directions should be separate; I don't think they should be part of one transition. So we went over there and we said, "Listen. Take whoever you want from the assembly" so they took Bob Shinn and some others "but don't take [Harriet Derman](#) because if you take Harriet Derman, District 18 [which was East Brunswick and some of the surrounding communities], we will lose that seat and we'll lose it in the special election [which would come that succeeding fall] and it will look like you don't have momentum and that Republicans are on the

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downswing.” The only person we said “don’t take.” Well, don’t you know they took Harriet Derman and made her, I think—what did they make her?

Rick Sinding: The Department of Community Affairs.

Don Sico: DCA, and so we lost that seat; we lost it the very next election thanks to a very clever and aggressive campaign by Senator Lynch who was familiar with that area. So they don’t always listen.

Rick Sinding: Let’s talk a little bit more about the transition. You suggest that personnel issues and policy issues should remain separate, but my recollection of this transition in particular was that there were groups of people who were responsible for essentially creating position papers and providing the governor-elect with sort of a list of things that she would have to confront in different departments. There were these outstanding issues. There were these policy directions that were being taken now and you had to make a choice of whether you wanted to continue that way or move in a different direction and often the person who you would appoint to head that agency would presumably be someone who shared your philosophy or agreed with the way in which certain policies would or would not be directed. Does that not enter into the equation in putting together a cabinet and making appointments to high-level administrative positions?

Don Sico: Yes, but I would do it differently. So what happens—because people are people and politics is politics, what happens during transitions, and I’ve seen it happen in a lot of transitions, is that the people who are on these policy teams—you have one for healthcare for example—are also competing for jobs in the administration. And so they go out of their way to say what they think the governor-elect wants to hear in order to curry favor when it would be far better for—I don’t know if they have to take a pledge or not but people who are not interested in jobs in the administration would, and there are a lot of people who aren’t interested in government jobs who could come up—

Rick Sinding: Increasingly so I would say.

Don Sico: Yeah, and <laughs> I’m one—who could come up with policy positions for the administration and then it would be for the incoming administration to select people who they think can implement those policy, people separate from that group. It’s just a better way to go because I think you get slanted points of view from the policy papers by having people compete for the positions while they’re writing policy papers.

Rick Sinding: On the other hand, it seems to me that some incoming governors or governors-elect already know who they want to have in certain key positions including in some of the agencies. So would you want them, if they’re prepared, to

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say somebody is going to be in this position early on? And I'm thinking now of Jim Florio whose very first announcement was within days of his election that [Bob Del Tufo](#) was going to be his attorney general. Wouldn't it be appropriate in that case for Del Tufo to be actively or intimately involved in the transition including, if not the development of the policy paper, at least having some input into the policy paper of the department that he's going to be running?

Don Sico: I could see that point of view but wouldn't it make as much sense for Bob to get an independent point of view, and when I say "independent point of view" you're not going to appoint a bunch of conservative Republicans to your transition team if you want to have a progressive government, but to get the best thinking of the best minds who are willing to serve in a transition capacity and then look at it and say, "Well, I never thought of it that way" rather than come in and say, "Well, I'm going to be the boss and I want to do it this way anyway so that's the way we're going to do it"? I think it makes for a better government.

Rick Sinding: My recollection is that in the Whitman transition that the DEP—and I was working at the DEP at the time—that the task force that headed up the transition for Whitman in DEP was headed by [Debbie Poritz](#) who went on to become attorney general and later chief justice of the supreme court in the Whitman administration, but she clearly did not have an interest in being the DEP commissioner. So that would be more along the lines of the kind of thing that you're talking about, but she had been a deputy attorney general in previous administrations working with the department.

Don Sico: So she had some expertise so that—yeah, and which I actually didn't know because I was going to—

Rick Sinding: I think I'm right about that.

Don Sico: Yeah, that makes a great deal of sense to me and I think that the Whitman transition—so I witnessed the Florio-Whitman transition and kind of a short transition between Whitman and DiFrancesco and I witnessed the McGreevey transition. I was more intimately involved during the [Chris] Christie transition and wasn't really involved at all in the Corzine transition, but the Whitman transition was hamstrung by the small margin [of victory] on top of the allegations of voter suppression in Newark, which for days on end consumed the transition team and they were more in a responsive mode than in a proactive mode.

Rick Sinding: You said you were somewhat more intimately involved in the—

Don Sico: The Christie transition—

Rick Sinding: —Corzine to Christie transition.

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Don Sico: Yeah. So that was a robust, I mean robust transition. I want to say there were 15 different transition policy teams and there were anywhere from 15 to 20 people serving on each transition team. The heads of them were noted experts. Bob Martin chaired the—I think it was the energy and utility one.

Rick Sinding: Utilities.

Don Sico: Everybody knows he wanted to be BPU president and not DEP commissioner <laughs> but maybe that's not going to happen; it's getting late. But anyway he had some expertise in there by virtue of what he was doing when he was at Accenture, so it was robust. Now here's where it falls down. So they came up with these—I don't even know where they are—these very comprehensive policy papers with recommendations for the governor in a number of areas. I'm more familiar with the one in healthcare because a friend of mine was the chair of that, Dave Knowlton from the New Jersey Healthcare Quality Institute, but then when it came time to govern wow, it's—most of those policy papers were rejected out of hand and were just—went on the scrap heap of New Jersey history.

Rick Sinding: Were they rejected or just neglected or ignored?

Don Sico: I'm not sure what the difference is but <laughs> let's say they weren't implemented and so I don't know why you would go through something like that and only to just toss them away.

Rick Sinding: From a Republican, that's a pretty scathing indictment of the Republican governor. Is it not?

Don Sico: Yeah, but I have to lobby for another year so—we can come back. When is this going public?

Rick Sinding: Whenever you say.

Don Sico: No, I'm just kidding. No. Whenever you want to talk about Governor Christie, I'm willing to do so.

Rick Sinding: I suspect we'll be doing that. It's October of 2016 so no more than a year from now maybe we'll start that view. Looking back on the four years of—

Don Sico: Oh, I'm sorry. I meant to say this and I apologize I'm not making for good TV. I'm sorry.

Rick Sinding: It's all right.

Don Sico: But I think one of the larger mistakes—and this is going to seem self-serving to people who are watching this—but one of the bigger mistakes I thought

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the Christie administration made in their transition was they wouldn't allow any lobbyists to serve on any transition team so there were no lobbyists whatsoever, anybody who was a registered agent or certainly people who lobbied for things but they weren't registered lobbyists. I thought that excluded a an awful lot of expertise that's out there. Just because you lobby doesn't mean you can't be objective and informed.

Rick Sinding: Actually, that raises an interesting question because I'm old enough to remember a time when you could count the number of lobbyists in Trenton on the fingers of maybe two hands, when Joe Katz was everybody's lobbyist and then Alan Marcus was everybody's—but it's grown tremendously since then. And you're right; there is a tremendous amount of expertise and there are some lobbyists who do a very effective job of educating administrators and legislators and then there are others who tend to spend more time trying to persuade than to educate. Comment if you will on the changing face of lobbyists and the changing influence of lobbyists over the years in Trenton.

Don Sico: I try to explain lobbying to prospective clients. My clients already know what a lobbyist does but I try to explain it this way. I really believe this and I believe it because I have spent a better part of 30, 40 years around legislators primarily and their executive-branch officials as well, but mostly legislators. I believe that anybody who tries hard enough can get access to a legislator, and so if you want to meet with, let's just say, Senator Beck in Monmouth County and you have an issue that you want to discuss with her and you're just an ordinary citizen; you're not even in her district, let's say. You would have a better chance if you were in her district but let's say you're not in her district. If you try hard enough, I believe that you can get that meeting with Senator Beck. It may take a while. It may take a number of phone calls but I don't believe that you have to make a political contribution to her; I don't believe that you have to know somebody who knows her. I believe that you can get that meeting. But what I explain to clients is, "But will you do that? You pay me to do that. I can probably do it a little faster than you can because I do have a relationship and relationships are important but ask yourself: are you going to spend the time to be on the phone and be on the phone the next week and send the e-mail and work over and over again to get that meeting and then once you get there are you going to understand the process enough so that you're able to explain your issue to her in a fashion that she will understand and which she can act on? That's what I do for you." That's what lobbyists do. I don't believe they provide—they don't pay for a client to have access but they can get you access maybe a little faster and they can help you once you get there explain things in a way that a legislator or a departmental official will understand and more importantly can act on. So why are there more? Because there are more laws and more regulations and more interests. I mean I'm a Republican and I prefer there'd be way fewer laws and regulations but there are a

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bunch of them. In fact, I asked the guy who runs the OLS Library who's a guy by the name of Peter Mazzei—I asked him—

Rick Sinding: Office of Legislative Services.

Don Sico: Yeah, over at the Office of Legislative Services. We set a record last year with the number of bills that were introduced in the assembly and the senate, bills, resolutions, of the sort, and we're going to set another record this year.

Rick Sinding: I was going to say don't we set a new record every year?

Don Sico: Well, no, because when we were in charge we put limits on the number of bills that legislators—it was unconstitutional as all get-out, don't get me wrong, but we did it anyway and they didn't stop us because they wouldn't get their bills posted. And we made legislators think about what their 50 best bills are rather than introducing 500 bills. We put limits on it and I think it makes-- we don't—there are way too many laws in this state and this country.

Rick Sinding: Thinking back on the Florio administration, the four years that you spent in opposition to the administration, what are the two, three, four most important memories or most significant things about that administration, about that time that come to mind for you?

Don Sico: Okay. We've already touched upon it. The economy was in the crapper for his first two years. It was beginning to come out in the second two years and we wanted to fuel that job growth and so we undertook a number of economic and job-growth initiatives in that second two years of his first term which I think all parties can be proud of. I tell the story that Bob Hughey who was the jobs czar, I think is what we called him anyway. I don't know what his formal title was.

Rick Sinding: He had been the environmental commissioner in the Kean administration, a Republican from Atlantic County, and then was brought in by Florio yes, to be the jobs czar.

Don Sico: And very good friends with Senator Gormley and we won't hold that against him, but he came to my office and Chip Stapleton, the executive director of the senate, was there with me and he brought these signs. They were huge blue and yellow signs that said "New Jersey Works" and on them it said "Governor Florio" and then it said "Senate president Don DiFrancesco, speaker Chuck Haytaian," and he brought two of them and they're metal, and he said, "We're going to put these up all over the state." This was with regards to the proposal where we were going to take port authority funds and we were going to monetize those funds and create—

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Rick Sinding: There's Rutgers Stadium expansion, the Meadowlands as I recall, the Atlantic City Convention Center, a number of significant structural things that took place at that time.

Don Sico: Well, the two signs that were brought to that meeting by Bob Hughey were the only two signs ever made, yes, and I think one is here at Rutgers now <laughs> so—

Rick Sinding: There are lots of "New Jersey Works" signs.

Don Sico: Yeah, but none of them had "DiFrancesco" or "Haytaian" on them, just those two that Bob Hughey brought for me and Chip, so I kept it forever and I brought it recently here to Rutgers.

Rick Sinding: That's one.

Don Sico: That's a way to get what you want so that's an example. I think welfare reform was a significant accomplishment. One thing that people—not overlook but because it's hard to put your finger on it, but the budget we did in June of 1993—and so Governor Florio's last budget, it would have been the fiscal year '94 budget—was a budget that was embraced by virtually everybody; it passed overwhelmingly in both the assembly and the senate. When we had our budget hearings we had to move them to the museum auditorium because so many people wanted to come in and praise that budget. It's an example of government working collaboratively and cooperatively to do the best they could do with the money we had for the people that we were serving and it's just a great budget; everyone thinks so. In fact, it was such a great budget that my counterpart, Chip Stapleton—he'll tell you this to your face—he wanted Governor Florio to get reelected, not Christie Whitman, because we were getting along so well at the time. So that's an example of how you can have—even with divided government you can have a budget that people agree on.

Rick Sinding: It sounds as though you're saying especially with divided government you can have that. This almost sounds as though it's a testimony to the fact that divided government can get things done more effectively than one-party government.

Don Sico: Yeah, because there's give and take but it does require a lot of relationship building first and then a lot of dialog and collaboration and cooperation.

Rick Sinding: Did your opinion of Jim Florio change in the second two years of his administration?

Don Sico: Yes. Some of that had to do with getting to—in the first two years there was no reason to call the minority executive director into any kind of meeting to

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talk to them and so he didn't, but I got to know him better and when you get to—you know, I tell people that the best judge you can have of whether somebody's going to get elected or not is whether you like them. If you think back to every election that you've ever cast a ballot in from fifth-grade student council up until presidential elections you usually vote for the guy you like best or the woman that you like best, the person that you like best.

Rick Sinding: The 2016 presidential election may break that mold but—

Don Sico: Yeah. Oh, my goodness. We'll do a whole another—

Rick Sinding: Yeah. You got to know Florio as a person.

Don Sico: Yeah, and as importantly I got to know Lucinda. I mean we were invited to Drumthwacket at events—we'd never been invited the first two years—so we were there at the Christmas party; we were there for other things and got to see them as people rather than governing officials.

Rick Sinding: And—

Don Sico: And he's a great guy. He's my friend.

Rick Sinding: Are you saying that you got to like him?

Don Sico: I do. I got to like him and I do like him. It doesn't mean that I wanted him to win that election. <laughs>

Rick Sinding: Unlike your counterpart in the senate.

Don Sico: Exactly.

Rick Sinding: In general, if you think back on the management style, the policies, the initiatives that were undertaken in the four years of the Florio administration, do you think that his heart was in the right place? Do you think that what Jim Florio tried to do was the right thing or would you take exception to some of the policy positions?

Don Sico: Wow. That's a hard one only because his heart is his heart and his heart was—and my belief is that he was true to his heart all four years but his heart isn't my heart. But I've never run for office, let alone gotten elected, so I wouldn't have taken the state in the same direction that he did but he—I think he was true to himself. I think he was mostly true to what he said while running for office.

Rick Sinding: With the exception of—

Don Sico: With some massaging, yes.

Rick Sinding: —on taxes.

Don Sico: Yes, of course. And so yeah, but that's why we have two parties and two differing political philosophies and so I'm—as I've already said I'm a smaller-government kind of guy. I don't think that government should be the answer to a lot of our solutions and other people believe differently.

Rick Sinding: You mentioned that you've been lobbying. Tell us what—

Don Sico: I lobby with Governor Florio with some clients. He's my partner in some instances.

Rick Sinding: Is that right?

Don Sico: Yes.

Rick Sinding: How did that come to pass?

Don Sico: Interesting. We wanted him to serve on the board of the New Jersey Healthcare Quality Institute and so I was asked to go meet with him because he knew of me.

Rick Sinding: That's the organization that Bobby Franks ran, or—

Don Sico: No, it's a different group; it's Dave Knowlton's group. So I was asked to go meet with him in order to write a press release to find out something and to actually make the formal offer of him serving on the Board of the Quality Institute. So I invited him to the Chef's Table at Rats because one of my clients was J. Seward Johnson, Jr. and he owned that restaurant at the time and I could have access to the Chef's Table anytime. So we had this private room, we had a very nice lunch, and it turns out we like one another so he asked me what my interests were, and I think the first instance where we actually started working together was with a solar client; it was the Mid Atlantic Solar Energy Industries Alliance. And then he would pick up the phone on occasion and say, "Hey, I got this other client that I want you to do with me" and so we started working together and have been working together for I guess ten years now.

Rick Sinding: I think that tells us a lot about how small a state New Jersey can actually be.

Don Sico: Yeah, and well, it's nice having a governor as a partner because as I didn't need to explain to him but I tell him all the time is that when a former governor calls even if you don't know him that well or you don't know the issue you're likely to pick up the phone.

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Rick Sinding: Anything else? You must have come here prepared thinking a little bit about what you wanted to talk about. What didn't I ask you that I should have?

Don Sico: No. I think I've gotten most of what I wanted to say. I will say I'm not a New Jerseyan by birth. I came in 1988. In fact, one of the nicest compliments that was ever paid to me was David Wald, who was the political reporter for The Star-Ledger who looked at me with kind of one eye askance when I first came here because I—

Rick Sinding: David tended to do that.

Don Sico: Yeah, and after I had been here and became executive director—I was executive director for maybe a year and a half and he came up to me and said, "I think you're a New Jerseyan now" so I appreciated that. So I'm not a Rutgers alum and I haven't been all that fully involved in Eagleton and so I'm really happy that Eagleton has invited me to participate in more of these activities and I enjoy it. And I have to confess that I'm an Ohio State fan and I'm sorry.

Rick Sinding: At this point, if you were a Michigan fan it could be worse. As a Rutgers alum and a New Jerseyan, welcome and thanks.

Don Sico: Thank you, Rick.