

**Interview with Brendan T. Byrne by Michael Aron
April 4, 2006**

Michael Aron: I am Michael Aron of NJN News. It is now the afternoon of Tuesday, April 4, 2006. We are about to sit down with Governor Brendan Byrne for the first of a series of interviews of this archive on the Byrne years. Let's start with learning how you became the governor of New Jersey

Brendan T. Byrne: By accident.

Q: Tell us about that accident.

Governor Byrne: It was in 1973 early one. Several people came to see me. I was then a judge. And they talked about my running for governor. I had been in government and I had been talked about peripherally off and on.

Q: For governor?

Governor Byrne: Yeah, I have press clips somewhere that took my name in a huge group in 1969, when I was five years supporting Meyner. But then in 1973 there were a number of candidates in the Democratic Party. I had had a meeting about a year before '73 with some people, and we decided that Cahill could not be beaten in '73, so there was no use looking any further at it. Then in about November or December, after the '72 election, people started coming to talk to me about the possibility of running.

Q: What kind of people?

Governor Byrne: Archie. Alexander, remember him? Archie had been Secretary of War I think in the federal government. And Helen Meyner. And Tony Grossi, I don't know, these are names you may not remember any more. And Donald Lan, by the way, who was then chairman of Union county. And Donald Lan had said to me if you want to run, let us know by Valentine's Day, I think, and we'll give you the line in Union county. I had called him and told him I didn't think I wanted to do it. But as things progressed in '73, there were I think five candidates who announced all of who had pluses and minuses. And Hudson County had not endorsed any of them. So at one point, I was a judge, and we had a week off early in April...

Q: How long had you been a judge by that point?

Governor Byrne: A couple of years. We had a week off and I had looked at the field, and I did not see a candidate being endorsed by Hudson County. So I said to myself, maybe if I got the Hudson County endorsement, it would fall into place. By that time, Cahill was looking weaker for a couple of reasons. One the income tax. Second...

Q: He proposed an income tax?

Governor Byrne: Oh, yeah.

Q: But there was no income tax, he had proposed one.

Governor Byrne: Yes, he had proposed one and he got four votes in the Assembly I think. But he had aroused the ire of a lot of people. So that plus a couple of people in his administration, like Paul Sherwin and Joe McCrane had gotten into a little traffic.

Q: A little traffic? What does that mean?

Governor Byrne: Yeah. Problems. Problems with election laws and so forth. Any way, it started to look like Cahill could be beaten and beaten by Sandman.

Q: A member of his own party in a primary?

Governor Byrne: Yes. Though I didn't think that was going to happen, but anyway, it looked like a Democrat could win.

Q: Was Watergate a factor?

Governor Byrne: Yeah, Watergate was not only a factor, but there had been an article in the New York Post, the headline of which was "The Man Who Couldn't Be Bought." And in the climate of Watergate I envisioned myself as a viable candidate. So I decided if I could get Hudson County to endorse me, to give me the line, I could win this thing, that for the first time. So I spent that week of vacation time from the bench going around making soundings.

Q: What month are we talking about?

Governor Byrne: April.

Q: Of '73?

Governor Byrne: Yes.

Q: And the filing deadline would be April? Late in April?

Governor Byrne: Yes. So I made some phone calls. I got Kenny McPherson and I got Don Lan back working with me. And we basically went around trying to put Hudson County together.

Q: Was there a boss of Hudson County?

Governor Byrne: There were three. Frank Rogers in Harrison, Paul Jordan in Jersey City, and Frances Fitzpatrick in Bayonne. I was able fairly early on to get tentative commitments from Paul Jordan and from Frank Rogers. But Frances Fitzpatrick was holding out because he knew I had worked for Meyner and he hated Meyner going back to the 1960 refusal of Meyner to support Kennedy for president.

Q: Who did Meyner support in 1960?

Governor Byrne: Himself. And maybe Lyndon Johnson, but not Kennedy. But any way, that infuriated Hudson County, and when Meyner ran in 1969, he did not carry Hudson County. So any way that was the big obstacle. I was having trouble with Fitzpatrick.. When Fitzpatrick finally agreed to listen to me, he wanted a commitment to rebuild the bridge from Bayonne to somewhere, which would have foreclosed shipping north of the bridge. I refused to go for it. That became a problem. But finally on the Monday after my vacation ended, and after I sat in court, I went over to his office and had a discussion with him, which didn't get very far. Then Don Lan and Kenny McPherson and I had dinner in a little saloon around the corner; and in the meantime McPherson calls Jimmy Dugan, who was Fitzpatrick's sidekick. And I was invited back to Fitzpatrick's house. And I got to Fitzpatrick's house, I remember, it was raining, we sat on the porch. He said okay, we are going to go for it.

Q: This was the same day he had said no? The same day?

Governor Byrne: Yes.

Q: What changed his mind?

Governor Byrne: I'll never know. Because he never mentioned the bridge again for the rest of his life, he said okay, you are our candidate. I said I want to be clear what that means. Does it mean I've got the line in Hudson County? He said yes. That was it.

Q: Well, that is one county out of 21, but let me stop you for just a second.

Governor Byrne: Well, it was one quarter of the Democratic primary vote.

Q: Okay, but these names sound like Irish names, Rogers, Jordan, Fitzpatrick, does ethnic politics figure into this? Or were all major statewide candidates Irish back in those days?

Governor Byrne: No, as a matter of fact, Dick Coffee was in that race, he is Irish. But Ralph DeRose was perceived as the front runner, I guess.

Q: That sounds Italian.

Governor Byrne: Yeah, and Ann Klein was in the race.

Q: Jewish.

Byrne: Yeah.

Q: But I mean were these guys lining up with you because you were Irish Catholic?

Governor Byrne: No, I think they were lining up because they had discounted the other candidates as possible losers. I didn't have any downside at that time.

Q: So you are a judge who gets the nod from the guy you need in Hudson County. Then what happens?

Governor Byrne: I become a candidate. We had to scramble to get the petition signed, because we had like four days to get the petition signed. Then it became a question of paying courtesy calls on the other candidates, which I did.

Q: Why did you have to do that?

Governor Byrne: Because it was smart politics. But any way, I talked for instance with Dick Coffee. We went over the pros and cons...

Q: He was from Mercer County?

Governor Byrne: Yes. I had great respect for Dick Coffee, a master politician. And after looking at the situation, Coffee dropped out. Now I visited with all the candidates, including Ralph DeRose, who stayed in and fought me, and Ann Klein.

Q: Seeking to get these people out?

Governor Byrne: Not seeking to get them out, just that we are fellow candidates, we are all Democrats, I suggested that in a Byrne Administration they might have a role, but I didn't promise them anything. Nor did I condition anything on them dropping out. And as I said, several of them did not, but I think it developed a better spirit among those people, whose basic objective was to win an election. Crabiel later dropped out.

Q: In Middlesex County?

Governor Byrne: In Middlesex. So with that I had Mercer and Middlesex, because when they dropped out they committed to me. Then I picked up some of Dick Coffee's support in the western counties, for instance, Gloria Decker who was the county chairman in Warren County and had supported Coffee

announced that she changed her mind and was going to support me. There was that kind of feeling here and there. I was perceived as a winner, in the primary any way.

Q: Let me stop you there and let's step back for a second. You say that your name had been projected into gubernatorial speculation as far back as 1969. Why? What was it about your career as either prosecutor or anything else that enabled you to even be in the speculation?

Governor Byrne: Well, first of all, I was known because I had spent almost three years with Meyner in the governor's office, basically as secretary to the governor.

Q: That is a title we don't have any more. What is it equivalent to today? Chief of staff?

Governor Byrne: I changed it to chief of staff when I appointed Bob Mulcahy to the job.

Q: You changed the title. Why?

Governor Byrne: I thought it gave more prestige to the job, and I was giving more power to Mulcahy than I had given to anybody else or that anybody else had ever had.

Q: So you were essentially chief of staff to Governor Meyner what, in the early '60s or late '50s?

Governor Byrne: I was secretary to the governor when he ran for re-election in '57. I had gone there late in '55 and left early in '59. So I was in Trenton a long time.

Q: What happened between '59 and '69 to keep your public profile raised?

Governor Byrne: I was prosecutor of Essex County for most of that time. That was a fairly high profile and I made it high profile.

Q: Why? Or how?

Governor Byrne: Because I did some exciting things as prosecutor.

Q: Such as?

Governor Byrne: I cleaned out the office to begin with. I had some high profile anti-crime, anti-organized crime stuff. We had what was known as the Charlie squad which conducted raids on illegal gambling operations. We got a lot of press, all over. Later on when we polled, only 4% of the people in Essex County knew who I was, but that wasn't the test. The fact is that people knew me.

Q: Did you have political ambitions at that time?

Governor Byrne: I didn't have ambitions. I was happy, believe it or not, being a judge. I had been promoted to assignment judge early on.

Q: Essex County assignment judge?

Governor Byrne: No, basically in Morris County. I had been acting assignment judge in Essex for a little while, but when there was an opening for an assignment judge in Morris County, Weintraub, who had a great influence on my life, by the way.

Q: Former chief justice.

Governor Byrne: Yeah, he was chief justice while I was a judge and he appoints me as assignment judge in Morris County, when being an assignment judge after a year and a half on the bench was unheard of.

Q: What governor put you on the bench to begin with?

Governor Byrne: Bill Cahill.

Q: So you had this high profile for seventeen years prior to 1973 or eighteen years?

Governor Byrne: Not high profile, but at least a recognizable name. So you are looking for names to throw in the pot, not everybody threw my name in, but there was a little bit of speculation.

Q: and you said there was a New York Post headline, "The Man Who Couldn't Be Bought." Where did that line come from and what was it in reference to?

Governor Byrne: It came from the tapes of organized crime of people, and they were having a discussion. I had had a very good relationship with the FBI when I was a prosecutor. The FBI would give me information that they were getting from illegal wiretaps, but I did not know that, I really did not know that. Then they would check on what I did with the information.

Q: From illegal wiretaps? They weren't getting court orders to do the wiretaps?

Governor Byrne: They weren't telling me they were wiretaps, I didn't, to this day I can't swear that they got them from wiretaps. They just told me it was information, but it had to be from wiretaps. But when it all came out, they wiretaps were published and there was one conversation in which organized crime had tried to fix a case, a pedestrian case, but they had tried to fix it. And the FBI told me that they were trying to fix the case, so I pulled the case out. Made sure it got tried and convicted. And in one conversation, it is on the wiretap, they say we tried to fix this case, you couldn't fix it with Brendan Byrne, he is a boy scout. No use trying to buy him, he's a man that can't be bought. We put that on bumper stickers.

Q: Whose idea was that?

Governor Byrne: Bumper stickers? Mine. Nobody else thought it was a good idea. I liked it on a bumper sticker.

Q: So we are in the primary period now, and Coffee has dropped out and Crabiell has dropped out. And DeRose stays in, and does Ann Klein stay in?

Governor Byrne: Oh yes.

Q: What county is she from?

Governor Byrne: From Morris County, she was an assemblywoman. But more than that, Ann Klein had been very active in the League of Women Voters. And she had a great following among women and liberals. Frankly, I probably would have voted for her if I hadn't become a candidate.

Q: How about Henry Helstoski, was he a possible candidate?

Governor Byrne: Yes, as a matter of fact, until the very end he was playing both sides on that one. He was talking about being a candidate. He would have had Bergen County had he become a candidate. And only at the last minute, I called him I think the Sunday before, the weekend before I became a candidate, to see where he was going.

Q: What was his position at the time?

Governor Byrne: He was a congressman.

Q: I thought so, from Bergen County?

Governor Byrne: Yes, and a serious contender. It turned out later he would have had his own problems. But then when he dropped out, Jerry Breslin, who was at time the county chairman in Bergen County, came aboard with me. And he accompanied me to Trenton the day I resigned the judgeship.

Q: How quickly did you resign the judgeship, after determining that you were a candidate?

Governor Byrne: Well, on Monday night, I had the conversation with Fitzpatrick. He tells me I got the line. And Tuesday morning I call the chief justice that I was about to resign unless he talked me out of it.

Q: That was Weintraub?

Governor Byrne: Yes. He is worth a special discussion, because we were very close. And I go into my courthouse, I had just finished trying a case but hadn't rendered an opinion, and I called the counsel, one of whom was Stewart Pollock. And I said I am going to leave here at noontime, if you want me to call it I don't have time to write an opinion; but if you want me to call the shot, come back at 11 o'clock and tell me; if you don't want it, I will declare a mistrial. They came back at 11 o'clock and said call it. And I called it against Stuart Pollock, which he has never forgiven me for. But I was so impressed with him, as soon as I had an opening for something, I gave it to him, put him on the public utility commission for a while. He eventually became my counsel.

Q: And you put him on the Supreme Court?

Governor Byrne: Yes.

Q: After Alan Handler?

Governor Byrne: Yes.

Q: So you resigned from the bench the very next day or you indicate that you are going to step down...

Governor Byrne: Yeah. I resigned; I left the courthouse at noontime. I went down to Cahill's office. By that time Jimmy Dugan, who sort of was masterminding all this, had a huge crowd at the outer office.

Q: Dugan at the time was?

Governor Byrne: A state senator from...

Q: Hudson County...

Governor Byrne: Bayonne, yes. And the New York Times, Ronnie Sullivan, had been touting me for days as a possible candidate. So that there was a great deal of excitement the day I resigned. I handed in my resignation to Bill Cahill. He looks a little upset, and I said governor, you have to run against somebody. Then I went to the outer office which is mobbed with people and made a short statement that said I was a candidate.

Q: Was that a customary thing to do? To hand your resignation to the governor? Or was that a declaration, what we might call a media stunt...

Governor Byrne: That was a media stunt. Yeah. But it worked.

Q: So you had a six week primary basically.

Governor Byrne: Just about.

Q: And what was that like?

Governor Byrne: First of all, I spent a lot of time being briefed on issues, because I had not been in government, the executive branch, for a couple of years.

Q: Had you ever run for office before?

Governor Byrne: No.

Q: Never before governor?

Governor Byrne: President of the high school.

Q: What high school?

Governor Byrne: Westside High School. No, so I spent a lot of time, they were very cautious with me. I had a reputation as a poor public speaker. The oratorical equivalent of a blocked punt, I think somebody said. And they were careful of me, putting me up against other candidates. So basically, we were being very cautious because we thought with Hudson County we had the primary won. And so we did not do a very aggressive campaign. Limited our joint appearances with other candidates. And it turned out that Ann Klein started coming up, because the liberal part of the party that pays attention was a little bit disappointed with me, on Ann's bandwagon, and saw her...

Q: Were you thought of as a moderate or a liberal?

Governor Byrne: Liberal but not as liberal as Ann. And Ann was smart, she knew the issues, she took positions.

Q: What was her position at the time?

Governor Byrne: She was an assemblywoman.

Q: I mean she became a cabinet officer in your administration?

Governor Byrne: Absolutely.

Q: And how did you assemble a campaign staff, and who?

Governor Byrne: A lot of it I inherited when Coffee dropped out. Dick Leone had been with Coffee, a young Archie Alexander had been with Coffee, all top flight people. All top flight people. Lew Kaden had been with Coffee. And so I took over a lot of Coffee's staff, even bought some Coffee buttons. So that is how we got going.

Q: And how did you fare in the primary? Obviously, you won it, but how big?

Governor Byrne: I fared as somebody who seemed like a disappointing candidate, because I was no John Kennedy, I was no, you know. But I fared all right and when Sandman won his primary, it was sort of all over.

Q: Sandman was a very conservative Republican congressman from Cape May who was on the Watergate committee, is that why he ran for governor?

Governor Byrne: No, he had run for governor a couple of times and had lost. And by the way, Bill Cahill and Sandman did not get along. There was no love lost.

Q: Cahill was more of a liberal Republican?

Governor Byrne: Yes.

Q: And Sandman was a conservative Republican from Cape May?

Governor Byrne: Yes.

Q: And Sandman won the primary.

Governor Byrne: Now I am running against Sandman.

Q: Let me take you back one second, what were the issues in the primary?

Governor Byrne: Income tax. Although I had made a statement about the income tax that I didn't think we needed it for the foreseeable future. And we didn't. To balance the budget we did not need an income tax. But nobody ever pursued that particularly, so that my statement that I don't think we need one for the foreseeable future became a highlighted statement in the campaign and came back to haunt me when I became governor.

Q: Did you take a position on abortion in that primary?

Governor Byrne: Well, Roe versus Wade had just been decided and people couldn't fully understand where we were going on that. It was not the primary issue with women's groups that it became. I would be asked about it and my position on it would be you have to respect what the Supreme Court says, but there was no organized program to defend women's rights. So that it was not a primary issue and I didn't treat it as such.

Q: Was higher education an issue?

Governor Byrne: Yeah. And I was for it. I remember meeting with college presidents at one point, it was a nice meeting. But they were not demanding \$3 billion bond issues...

Q: ...like they do today.

Governor Byrne: I wouldn't say that.

Q: You say you ruled out the need for an income tax for the foreseeable future and that phrase came back to haunt you. What did you mean at the time by foreseeable future, and did you know what you were saying or did it just pop out?

Governor Byrne: In the course of the campaign, we had discussed an income tax. When I was running in the primary, Cahill had been in favor of an income tax and had a bill. I criticized his bill. The position I took in the primary when carefully asked was that I would not go for the Cahill income tax, because it didn't do certain things. I had four things I thought an income tax would have to satisfy in order for me to support it. But by and large, all that was lost. Now when Sandman wins the primary, the income tax becomes more of an issue. If Cahill had won, we would have both been for an income tax in some form. Cahill loses; the income tax becomes Sandman's issue. I was probably more cautious than I had to be, but I also think the press overplayed my foreseeable future statement. We needed some way to solve the school funding issue. That was never really intelligently discussed in that 1973 campaign. How are you going to fund schools and neither of us really discussed that the way it should have been discussed. So now I am governor and in 1974 I have to face the issue. And we did decide at that point that probably the way to do it would be through an income tax. Although there were other alternatives that were doable. John Russo had written an interesting paper for one of his campaigns, he was senator from Ocean County, on a statewide property tax and using that as a surtax to fund the schools. So we really decided after, finally decided, afterwards that income tax was the way to go. After I proposed the income tax, I kept getting hit with these cockamamie schemes of a penny here, a penny there, that would not have been a long ange solution to anything. And remember in 1977, Ray Bateman came out with a form of that kind of a solution and it lost him the election.

Q: We will get to that I am sure at some point. With Sandman as your opponent in the general election, wouldn't it have been better to have been up front and run on the income tax notion, rather than waffle?

Governor Byrne: That is what everybody tells me in retrospect. It might have been. Except the income tax in New Jersey had been a hysterical issue over the years. In the old days, when the Newark News was the dominant newspaper in New Jersey, the Newark News would write editorials about the income tax and how bad it was and anybody that proposed it, and Hughes proposed it you remember, got killed. So it was an issue to stay away from.

Q: Did Hughes get killed?

Governor Byrne: Sure, Hughes lost the 1967 legislature on that issue plus the workers' right to strike and get strike benefits. Those are the two issues that killed him. He lost the legislature.

Q: So tell me about the campaign against Sandman from June until November. Was it a cakewalk?

Governor Byrne: Yes, it was a cakewalk.

Q: Why?

Governor Byrne: Because nobody liked Sandman, nobody liked his policies. I think the New York Times wrote an editorial like a week after the primary, in effect endorsing me, and Sandman had absolutely no credibility. And he was not, in the public view, he was not a nice guy. I didn't mind public appearances with Sandman because people didn't like him.

Q: I remember him from the Watergate hearings, nobody liked that guy.

Governor Byrne: That is the main reason...

Q: He was one of Nixon's defenders.

Governor Byrne: Absolutely, to the end. But he had a style that was irritating. I looked forward to joint appearances with Sandman. He was no boob. He knew the business, but people would say to him that he had the better argument, but they were going to vote for Byrne.

Q: What were the issues, if any?

Governor Byrne: Income tax. And Sandman didn't have much of an issue, because I didn't have a record. So he couldn't attack me on the record. He could attack me on the income tax, but Cahill had supported an income tax. He made some mistakes. He had said at one point, and don't forget he was a regional candidate who hadn't been doing issues on a statewide basis. He at one point said we don't want off-shore drilling at Cape May, if you are going to do off-shore drilling, do it in Monmouth County where they don't care about clean beaches. I mean there you go. Or another interesting thing about Sandman is that he had once voted in the legislature against having hot and cold water for migrant workers. He was the kind of guy that when I brought that out, I said this is a guy who wouldn't even, it hurt him. Now four years later I found that Ray Bateman had voted the same way on the same bill, but people thought that Ray Bateman was such a nice guy that no, he must have had some reason.

Q: Did you try to use it against Bateman?

Governor Byrne: Once, and it didn't work and I stopped using it against Bateman.

Q: How did you approach the campaign? What did you do to campaign?

Governor Byrne: I was, well, first, it was my first campaign ever for anything. So I wasn't at all sure of myself. I was really in the hands of experienced campaign people, Leone, Kaden, Coffee, David Garth.

Q: David Garth, from New York?

Governor Byrne: Yes. So I didn't even have an appreciation of how to schedule myself.

Q: Did you run for governor every day all summer long?

Governor Byrne: Sure. I mean I worked hard, and I was exhausted at the end. I had no idea how to pace myself.

Q: How do you run for governor, what do you do?

Governor Byrne: You work 24 hours a day. And if they gave you, I remember, they gave me a Sunday morning off one time and I ran over to the local bowling alley, because you figure I got to get that one more vote.

Q: I thought you meant you went over to get some exercise.

Governor Byrne: No, no.

Q: Did you like the campaigning aspect of it?

Governor Byrne: I think the campaign you do like when you are doing it, but you do get tired. I mean the most fun in this business is meeting people and getting to know them and understand them and get a feeling of what the issues are that are bothering them. You meet some lovely people. I remember being on the boardwalk in Keansburg one time, I met a nice lady who was all by herself walking on the boardwalk. I went over to her and said I am Brendan Byrne, I am running for governor. She said I am from Hudson County, I think we are for you. There are all kinds of stories like that.

Q: What did you like least about campaigning?

Governor Byrne: The time. The fact that it is so exhausting. You are looking at your schedule and say, my god, I've got three more events tonight. And in the second campaign, I handled that better and didn't do things that were going to grind you down so much.

Q: How many children did you have at the time of the first campaign?

Governor Byrne: Seven.

Q: So you had some serious family responsibilities as well.

Governor Byrne: Billy was four and he was sleeping through the night and he was the youngest. So... and the kids helped. They would come and do things; they got to know the state. That is how Nancy wound up as the director of tourism, she knew the state, she had been all over.

Q: Do you think it is an easier state to campaign in than others because it is so compact?

Governor Byrne: In a way yes, but in a way no; because people do not take distance as an excuse for you not showing up. So you are expected to, in Vineland, New Jersey, you can't tell them you're going to be in Albany that night.

Q: Did you have formal debates with Sandman?

Governor Byrne: Sure. And I enjoyed those. I am not sure I won them all, but I held my own. I remember one debate, he accused me of being a novice at this business, not knowing where the men's room is in the state house. I got up and said, I know where the men's room is, I just don't know where the caucus room is. Things like that. I thought I would be getting the better of him. But he was not a bad debater.

Q: How important was television at that time, as opposed to the newspapers?

Governor Byrne: First of all, we did very little television.

Q: You had David Garth, the guru...

Governor Byrne: I had David Garth, but the amount of budget we had for television was very modest. And I think we may have made six or seven different spots, and then we had some people doing spots for us, testimonials.

Q: Who, do you remember?

Governor Byrne: Republicans, there was a Republicans for Byrne but that was pretty good. A couple others like that.

Q: Any celebrity types?

Governor Byrne: I don't think we, Peter Rodino is as close as we got to a celebrity, he did a spot.

Q: How about television coverage? Was there much television coverage of the New Jersey governor's race back then?

Governor Byrne: No, not a lot. You got on television, but it wasn't on a daily basis. And New Jersey Network...

Q: We were just coming into existence back then.

Governor Byrne: Yeah, and I still play golf once in a while with Reggie Wells who was with New Jersey Network.

Q: Right, he went to Channel 9 subsequently.

Governor Byrne: Good guy.

Q: Yeah, I agree. Newspaper coverage was what it is today?

Governor Byrne: Early on, the Times and Ronnie Sullivan who was with the Times who was fascinated by New Jersey and did the New Jersey coverage, he started out really touting me as the candidate. Then once I became the candidate, he did his job as a reporter and tried to tear me down. Although we are good friends and I still see Ronnie, but the coverage was not overwhelming. And the Ledger did a whole series of position papers, which I think they still do for candidates.

Q: Positions of the candidates on the issues so the public can...

Governor Byrne: Yes, education and environment.

Q: Was the Newark News alive by '73?

Governor Byrne: If the Newark News had been alive by '73, I wouldn't be here.

Q: It was a conservative paper?

Governor Byrne: It was a conservative paper, a Republican paper. I was prosecutor of Essex County for almost nine years, the Newark News was in existence. They wrote great stories about me and handling the prosecutor's office, never once a favorable editorial about me.

Q: It is interesting to hear today that it was a conservative Republican newspaper, because it spawned all the best journalists.

Governor Byrne: The journalists were fine, the stories were good, and I got a lot of good stories out of the Newark News, which helped me, help me establish myself; first as a good prosecutor. But the Newark News editorially was just not for me.

Q: The Scudder family, now that I think of it.

Governor Byrne: Scudder, Floyd Fennelly. I mean one on one I liked those guys. They spoke nicely to me, and they in fairness, gave me good coverage in the news sections. But editorially they would not have supported me, and they certainly were hysterical about an income tax.

Q: So what did you win by?

Governor Byrne: Somewhere over 700,000 votes.

Q: Do you recall what the percentage breakdown was?

Governor Byrne: Almost 2 to 1.

Q: Really, more than 60/40?

Governor Byrne: I think it was around that.

Q: You trounced him.

Governor Byrne: 700,000 votes...

Q: Out of probably what, a little over 2 million cast?

Governor Byrne: Yeah. 2 million. It was not close. 8:03 the streamers came across the television sets.

Q: Do you recall how you felt that night?

Governor Byrne: Relieved, because you never know what is going to happen in an election. You see people standing in line to go into the voting machine. You have no idea what they are thinking. That is the most tense, in a way, time for a politician, is from about 5 o'clock at night until 8 o'clock. When you are really sort of helpless. Any other time you can always go do another thing, ring another doorbell, but at that point on election night you are helpless.

Q: So you felt a sense of relief more than exultation, because you knew you were going to win this election any way, for four or five months?

Governor Byrne: We had a pretty good idea we were going to win, yes. So that was frankly, Cahill knew I was going to win, and Cahill wasn't a bit disappointed. Not that I won but that Sandman lost. As a matter of fact, I remember when I went down to Washington to get the endorsement of the AFL-CIO, and I met with George Meany. I remember him saying I am not sure whether we are for you or against the other guy, but that is what it was.

Q: Now you are elected governor.

Governor Byrne: I am?

Q: Yes, this is your life. and you have basically two months and a week or so to organize a government. What do you do first? Take a vacation?

Governor Byrne: First thing I did is you take a week's vacation, which I did. I went out to Arizona. I always liked to go down to Arizona. I went out there and stayed at the Old Camelback Inn. Met the then Governor Castro of Arizona, we became friends for a long time. I stayed at a Marriott property and had lunch with both the senior Marriott and the junior Marriott. And it was just relaxation. I took a couple of people with me. Don Lan was with me, and I forget who else. But any way, we had some of us out there, and then we came back and meanwhile while I am out there I am trying to figure out how many departments there are in state government, and who should be what. Then we came back and started, first of all, I was trying to staff the departments of government. My inclination had been to use people who had been candidates and who were pretty good and knew government. Ann Klein, for instance, was a natural, even though she had run against me. She was interested in institutions, that was a natural for her, although I considered her at one time for transportation commissioner. But she wasn't really interested in that either. Ed Crabiell had always wanted to be Secretary of State and I gave him that job. Dick Coffee was interested in banking, but I had a post for him in that but then he lost interest in that I think. So basically I tried to get the people who were interested in the campaign, either as candidates or otherwise. I wanted an attorney general who would have an anti-Watergate image. First, frankly, I approached Herb Stern, who as we speak is getting a lot of publicity with the investigation of the College of Medicine. Herb thought about it, but wouldn't take it.

Q: He had been the U.S. Attorney?

Governor Byrne: Yes, he had quite a record and would have projected the message that I needed to project. So I turned to Bill Hyland, who had been frankly a very possible candidate for the governorship in 1969 and didn't do it. He was on the SCI, he had a good reputation there. I succeeded Bill as the president of the Public Utility Commission. He became the leading candidate and he accepted and projected the image of integrity that I wanted in the attorney general. That was, frankly, the key appointment. Dick Leone let it be known that he would like to be treasurer, there was no problem with that. Lew Kaden wanted to be counsel to the governor. Jerry English was in that mix, she became legislative counsel. Then we started hunting for some people. Alan Sagner, who originally wanted to be health commissioner, I think, and didn't have an MD, at the time I think the statute called for an MD, he settled for transportation commissioner and wound up loving it. Then Joel Jacobson who had been active in that campaign, just a terrific guy, Joel wanted to be labor commissioner, because he had been president of the CIO. I wanted a different direction in the labor commissioner, with John Horn. I had to talk Joe into becoming public utility commissioner, which he was furious about at first. But later he thanked me for it, because it was a great new experience for him, he was good and he was compassionate, everything you would want a public servant to be. He was not the first labor commissioner, John Horn was. I am telling you. Or maybe John Horn came later, oh, okay.

Q: I have a memo that Dick Leone sent you about the transition. Apparently, Leone was in charge of the transition, is that correct?

Governor Byrne: Probably.

Q: Was he your closest advisor?

Governor Byrne: Well, it depended. If you are talking governmental advice, probably Dick Leone. If you are talking about political advice, probably Kenny McPherson. Kenny had, and still has, a great ability to feel the pulse of the political community. And I relied on Kenny a lot.

Q: He is a lawyer from Hudson County?

Governor Byrne: Right. I put him on the Port Authority for a little while, but he liked to be his own man. He would come down and we would talk.

Q: The very first memo from Leone to you deals with the sports complex. Is that something you had to deal with right away?

Governor Byrne: yeah. absolutely.

Q: Even in transition?

Governor Byrne: Even in transition. What happened was Cahill had urged me to sign the deal with the Giants. And I had Leone and Kaden and Jimmy Zazzali look at the deal. We thought it was way too much in favor of the Giants, so I actually called a meeting at the Princeton Club in New York in late November, I think it was, before I was governor, with the Giants and Sonny Werblin. And Sonny Werblin was completely committed to the Giants, but we looked at the deal.

Q: Werblin had been with the Jets, but he was running the Sports Authority?

Governor Byrne: No, Cahill had made him chairman of the Sports Authority board, yeah, and he was upset that I didn't sign. Cahill called me one day, he said I want you to come out in support, I forget what was pending in the legislature, but he said I want you to come out in support of it today. I said I am not going to do that Governor, I am not ready to do that. He said if you don't do that today, I am going to call a press conference and announce that the deal is dead with the Giants. I said you can do that if you want to, I wouldn't if I were you. He called me back later in the afternoon and said that he was not going to do that.

Q: This was before you were elected?

Governor Byrne: No, before I was sworn in.

Q: And this echoes now 32 years later with Corzine, Codey and the Giants and Jets and stadium deals.

Governor Byrne: As Yogi would say, it's deja vu all over again. But any way, we renegotiated the deal, took out a lot of things that we couldn't live with and they agreed to it. So yeah, we had to do that right away. And then Werblin, for our little disagreements, was a great chairman of the Sports Authority. Advocated the concept of New York/New Jersey being a megalopolis, we are all in this together. And it worked.

Q: This was the beginning, there was no stadium at this point?

Governor Byrne: There was no stadium. There was maybe a hole, I think they had broken ground or something, but they didn't have any money. That was a key thing, to raise the money. If I hadn't supported the bond issue, the deal would not have gone. So the reason I had all that leverage is I had to raise the bond money.

Q: How much, do you recall?

Governor Byrne: I don't recall. It was a must, but I think it was under \$100 million. Nelson Rockefeller had decided this was not good for New York and had come out in favor of a stadium over the railroad yards in New York. He had discussed with his brother and other people not buying the bonds. And it came down to Prudential, I think, buying the last \$50 million for a bond. I also remember I got a call, I think it was Don McNaughton, who was then president of Prudential, he called me and said we will buy the bonds if you let us appoint one of the members of the commission. I said no, I am not ready to abandon my responsibilities as the governor, but I would be happy to consider any candidate you gave me for appointment. And he accepted that. He gave me a guy, who I forget his name at the moment, but he was a great addition to the board. He even supervised some of the construction. So that worked well.

Q: That is fascinating, it is all in how you word things sometimes, right? We'll give you the \$50 million if you let us appoint a candidate, I can't let you do that but I'll be happy to consider whoever you nominate.

Governor Byrne: Yeah, and if he had given me a bad name, I wouldn't have appointed him. And he understood that. But the name he gave me, I wish I could remember...

Q: How helpful was Governor Cahill in the transition?

Governor Byrne: Very helpful. He made all the stuff available. Cahill, by the way, is one of the most underrated governors of New Jersey. Half of the stuff I did Cahill had started and couldn't get done. I remember when I was in the transition, I spent a week of vacation in the islands, and I took a whole boxful of his reports and read them. So the housing things, the income tax things, all of that was Cahill's sponsorship that we just pursued and got done.

Q: What kind of guy was he?

Governor Byrne: Cahill was to me a lovely guy. I had some surreptitious support from him during the campaign. He left one piece of paper on his desk when I walked in the office and took over, and it was a

note from Charlie Sandman asking Cahill to be helpful in the last few days of the campaign, and Cahill wouldn't do it. And he left that piece of paper on his desk. So no, I have a great admiration and respect and affection for Bill Cahill. A lot of people didn't like him. He could be gruff, he could have bad days, but basically a guy who wanted to leave the state a little better than he found it.

Q: There are references in your transition memo to your program, we'll put this guy in charge of this, that woman in charge of that, this guy in charge of that, that woman in charge of this, we'll put this person in charge of your program. Did you have a program?

Governor Byrne: Yeah, we did, as a matter of fact, and spelled out with the priorities that Watergate presented to us. The priorities were sort of, we called it government under glass. We were reacting to all the bad things that were happening in Washington, and we were saying we're going to have open government in New Jersey. So we did things like financial disclosures from all of the cabinet members in the key offices in state government. We opened voter registration to postcard registration, so you could get the vote if you wanted the vote by just signing a postcard. And open public meetings, things like that. That was the most important thing was to get the people's confidence back in government. I think we made that an earlier priority, we got those bills passed and yes, we had that program.

Q: That is another deja vu all over again. Jon Corzine just came into office promising government under glass again, essentially?

Governor Byrne: In effect. He also said in his inaugural that if you worry too much about being reelected, you probably would not want to reelect me, which was a direct quote from my first inaugural.

Q: Which was apparently a quote from Woodrow Wilson?

Governor Byrne: I attributed it, we both attributed it to Woodrow Wilson.

Q: But he didn't attribute it to Brendan Byrne?

Governor Byrne: No, well, he may have winked at me when he was saying it.

Q: Why don't we break here?

Governor Byrne: All right. Leone winked at me when he was saying it.

Q: Did he?

Governor Byrne: Sure.

End of Byrne 4-4-2006 Interview