

Gov at the crossroads

It's either higher taxes or courage

By David G. Tuerck | Tuesday, May 26, 2009 | <http://www.bostonherald.com> | Op-Ed

Now is when Gov. **Deval Patrick** decides his political future.

The Legislature has laid down the gauntlet: The governor can either sign legislation that will raise the sales tax or use his veto and let Beacon Hill thumb its collective nose at him and override the veto. For the sake of both the commonwealth and his political future, he should call the Legislature's bluff.

What the governor needs to understand but what also runs counter to his political instincts is that this is not about teacher layoffs, human services cutbacks and all the other dire consequences that the increased sales tax is intended to avert. This is about politics and moral courage.

In the Legislature, politics has trumped moral courage. The Legislature knows that the increase in the sales tax will not bring in enough revenue to end the "crisis," as it is commonly seen. But it also knows that it has to raise some tax - any tax - to show that it is willing to sacrifice a few thousand private-sector jobs in order to pacify the union bosses and other special pleaders to whom it is largely beholden.

It is this lack of courage that makes the Legislature so terrified of the "R" word. When Patrick tried to reform transportation by abolishing the Turnpike Authority and moving MBTA employees' health care to the Group Insurance Commission, he got a poison pill from the Legislature. When he tried to cut back on overpriced police details, the Legislature thwarted him by tying the hands of local governments. When he tried to raise the gas tax, the Legislature decided a sales tax hike carried less political risk.

So now it's the governor's move. Now he gets to decide whether he can practice good politics and responsible government at the same time. He might start by observing what just happened in California, where the voters just said, "No new taxes" to the public employee unions and their political minions. He might also consider a Suffolk University poll in which only 34 percent said he should be re-elected while 71 percent saw a return of "Taxachusetts." He might also consider how the Republicans are already teeing up 2010 to be a repeat of 1990, when Taxachusetts was no memory but a reality that gave the Republicans the governorship and a veto-sustaining presence.

As for responsible government, there are many places to start. For example, genuine pension reform and demanding that municipal workers bring down their health costs. Prevailing wage reform, which could save the state \$200 million annually. There's repeal of the union-pleasing but anti-taxpayer Pacheco Law (modified in the Senate budget, but not repealed). And state and local government could save almost \$1 billion annually by imposing 5 percent wage cuts on public workers.

If Patrick took the position that there will be no new taxes until we get serious reform along these lines, he could outfox both the Legislature and his future Republican opponent. He could "triangulate" like Bill Clinton did when he signed welfare reform and took that issue from the GOP. My advice: Governor, let the Legislature override your veto, and let legislators in Lawrence, Lowell and other areas that will get hurt by the higher sales tax give up their seats while you're re-elected on a platform of no new taxes without real reform.

The union bosses would scream bloody murder, but what would they do? Throw money at the even more anti-union Republicans? And only a small minority of workers even belong to unions. Of them, many would be quite happy not to see their taxes rise and equally happy to see you hold all public workers more accountable. As for the rest of us, well, you gave us a taste of responsible government when you stood up to the police unions. With this veto, we would have a great deal more to celebrate.

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