Turning the Page to the Next Four Years

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Posted: January 28, 2014
Taunton Daily Gazette, Fall River Herald News & Wicked Local

Gov. Deval Patrick may have higher aspirations as a future presidential candidate, vice presidential nominee, or justice of the Supreme Court. Whatever those aspirations may be, his time as governor of Massachusetts and his record running the Bay State will determine his political potential and how far he can climb.

As a candidate in 2006, Patrick featured a campaign slogan of "Together We Can" and a promise to reduce property taxes, both of which seem at odds with his recent budget proposal and his handling of crises during his time in office. Offering his final budget as governor for Fiscal 2015, Patrick is proposing a budget that is 5 percent higher than the previous year and includes $97 million in new taxes on such items as candy, soda, travel websites, bed and breakfasts and vacation rentals.

His final budget does little for local aid, which could reduce property taxes for towns and cities if properly funded. According to the State House News Service, Geoffrey Beckwith, executive director of the Massachusetts Municipal Association, described the governor's budget as "disappointing." Beckwith continued, "It's actually a very difficult and painful budget for cities and towns. ... Overall, this budget would force cities and towns to reduce the services that they provide and increases their reliance on the property tax to balance their budget."

Gov. Patrick's time in office will not only be judged by the budgets he proposed or his policies but also by his leadership as the executive of the state. During his time, some state agencies have worked well and others have fallen flat. The ones that worked well when we needed them most include our state's first responders and law enforcement agencies when apprehending the Boston Marathon bombers. The state was united, the governor was leading and his administration shined.

However, the shining moments have often been overshadowed. More than we would like, Gov. Patrick has been defensive in response to criticism and offered little in the form of explanation other than thin-skinned, rhetorically-charged outbursts to those that press him for explanations.

The governor's administration has been no stranger to controversy and crisis. Putting aside ex-Lt. Gov. Timothy Murray's tenure, looking at how the governor's administration has responded to problems and responsibility can be dismal.

Annie Dookhan was the rogue chemist who cost taxpayers millions due to a lack of oversight. As a result, JudyAnn Bigby was forced to resign as secretary of health and human services after Dookhan's damage was done. Department of Transitional Assistance Commissioner Daniel Curley's resignation and the subsequent audit that identified the deceased benefiting from welfare programs was a disaster.
Early Education and Care Commissioner Sherri Killins moonlighting despite a generous state salary was appalling. Sheila Burgess, the former state highway safety director, resigned a few days after it was revealed that her driving record included several motor vehicle crashes, speeding violations and various other infractions. Carl Stanley McGee took the position as the acting executive director of the state Gaming Commission despite serious ethical questions and was forced to resign. The most recent setbacks, at the Department of Children and Families, are still leaving more questions than answers.

Most of, if not all of these, were opportunities to show leadership, take responsibility and change the course starting by what is publicly said in response to each of these failures. The "Together We Can" Deval Patrick of 2006 was nowhere to be found in most of these unfortunate situations.

When Gov. Chris Christie of New Jersey was confronted on his "Bridgegate" scandal, the next day he held a press conference, fired the staff person responsible and said, "I believe that all of the people who were affected by this conduct deserve this apology and that's why I'm giving it to them." Gov. Christie took responsibility; apologized, corrected the source of the problem and most likely the people of New Jersey will be content with that.

There is something to be said for politicians when they take responsibility. It's admirable and refreshing and it doesn't happen enough, at least not in Massachusetts. Tomorrow is a new day; let's hope that over the next four years the next governor will set a new course.

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