

Stile: Christie budget speech provokes howls -- just as desired

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Governor Christie's "emergency" budget speech on Thursday included this one inaccurate prediction:

"The defenders of the status quo will start chattering as soon as I leave this chamber," he said.

They didn't chatter. They howled.

"Three weeks into his administration, all we know so far about the governor's budget priorities are that they consist of an income tax cut for millionaires and a property tax increase for everyone else," complained Sen. Paul Sarlo of Wood-Ridge, chairman of the Senate Budget Committee.

Christie's speech was as much a strategic political provocation as it was a strategy to close a \$2 billion shortfall in the current state budget. He successfully goaded Democrats into a wartime footing. Democrats sat as his polite, glum audience during the speech and became his foil the instant he left.

The Democrats followed of a time-honored Trenton tradition of acting as the loyal, critical opposition, which suited the Christie scheme just fine. The same hand he extended to Senate President Stephen Sweeney and Assembly Speaker Shelia Oliver in a grand gesture of bipartisan cooperation at his inauguration can now point an angry finger of blame at the duo and their members. They will soon be depicted as the intransigent, parochial enemies of change.

"They'll say the problems are not that bad; listen to me, I can spare you the pain and sacrifice. We know this is simply not true. New Jersey has been steaming toward financial disaster for years due to that kind of attitude," Christie said.

Patrick Murray, the Monmouth University pollster who watched the speech, said it was a bold step and let Christie appear that he is controlling the debate.

"People know that there has to be an enemy in the process," Murray said. "If it looks like the Democrats are defending the status quo, then they are part of the problem."

Christie signaled earlier this week that the bipartisan cordiality was about to come

crashing down.

He kept the Democrats in the dark over the speech details until Wednesday night, when a cursory summary was provided to Sweeney and Oliver in a five-minute conference call. Details were expected to follow the next morning in an 8 a.m. e-mail that didn't arrive until closer to 9:30 a.m., an hour before the speech.

Democrats also fumed over Christie's executive order, his 14th in four weeks, which he'll use to carry out bold budget-balancing measures, including a \$475 million cut in school aid and a \$12 million cut in reimbursements to hospitals for treating uninsured patients. Some Democrats began hinting that Christie has a Napoleonic streak, using executive orders to bypass the Legislature, where Democrats maintain majority control.

Oliver hinted that they might challenge the order in court, which again, would probably be just fine for Christie, giving him another forum to portray them as obstructionists. And besides, by the time a legal challenge is exhausted, the Legislature and Christie will be battling over the next budget mess.

Christie, who maintains strong approval ratings and polls that support steep cuts to government spending, has the upper hand in the court of public opinion, and the Democrats know it. Many tempered their anger with diplomacy. Sweeney reaffirmed his "willingness to work with this governor" and noted that he personally likes Christie. Assembly Budget Chairman Lou Greenwald said Christie "batted one for three today," and praised his pension reforms.

Republican defenders said the criticisms reflected the Democrats' disconnect with an angry, disgusted public that tossed Jon Corzine out of office. They want change, and they could care less about the legislative briefings or legal quibbles over executive orders.

"I think the governor is doing what he was elected to do — managing problems," said Republican Sen. Joe Kyrillos, a Christie confidant. "He is forcing what he believes are the right outcomes and in some cases the only outcomes through the institutional powers and through the force of personality, no matter how the chips fall.

Democrats will need to find a way to navigate the Christie hurricane if they are going to serve as an effective and viable opposition. They plausibly argue that the cut in school aid could spike property taxes because schools are responsible for nearly two-thirds of the property tax bill. Christie says school district surpluses can easily cover the cost of the lost aid, thus avoiding cuts in staff and programs. Maybe for this year, but many districts depended on that surplus nest egg to balance the next year's budget.

If they do craft a message and a proposal, they'll have to do it on their own, not without Christie's input. Democrats learned Thursday that with friends like Chris Christie, who needs enemies?

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