

## Nothing left to lose

**Colin Read: Everybody's Business**

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— You have to hand it to Paterson.

There has not been another governor in recent history who has had the courage to tell New York what most of us already know. The economy is flat on its back, and government is no longer the solution.

Indeed, government has become the problem.

If nothing else, Gov. Paterson is demonstrating that what would normally be considered political suicide might actually be his best chance to get reelected. Or, maybe, he is a politician who believes in doing the right thing even if it is not the most politically advantageous thing. Either way, I am glad that the political debate has been rejuvenated.

Gov. Paterson and President Obama both came to office at turbulent times. The governor's office was mired in scandal and the legislature was as polarized and dysfunctional as ever. We had suffered one of the worst decades in history, found ourselves increasingly engaged in two escalating wars, and were plunged into the greatest recession since the Great Depression.

In these times, government has offered us little but placation. Having to take off our shoes before we proceeded to the departure gate for a flight is somehow meant to make us feel safer. And witnessing the Senate bicker and vote en bloc when we cried out for financial and health-care reform was somehow meant to give us the sense that our elected officials were governing.

Instead, there were "surprise" election outcomes in Virginia, New Jersey, Massachusetts, New York City and even in our own 23rd Congressional District. I am not surprised at all. Except in New York City, where an incumbent mayor, the country's eighth richest person, squeaked out reelection with the fewest votes since women's suffrage in 1917, despite outspending his opponent 14 to one, each of the special elections went to the party not in power. There is a strong anti-incumbency mood out there, precisely because our politicians are too busy posturing for re-election and not busy enough making our country a better place.

I am proud of our governor, though. He sets an example for political candor that is rarely seen, especially in Albany. If the economy thrives on transparency, truthfulness and accurate information, he sets a good precedent I hope others will match.

Unfortunately, he has been liberated to tell New York what it must hear, but does not want to hear, precisely because the stakes are so low. If the governor realizes his chances of reelection are small, he can afford to be honest and do the right thing. Ironically, doing the right thing right now might actually be the best thing.

Gov. Paterson makes a good case for term limits. At the same time, he points out the problem with them.

Yes, term limits have a liberating effect on a legislator. Freed from making decisions based on a political calculus, politicians might simply deliberate based on what they think is in our long-term best interest, whether or not it is what we want to hear in the short term.

The beauty of term limits is that our elected officials will govern based on the intuition they demonstrated to us when we first elected them. The sacrifice is that we would lose precisely those officials that are speaking the truth to us. However, if we don't have term limits, it also seems like we are immersed in politics rather than surrounded by pragmatics.

I know Gov. Paterson is telling us what we don't want to hear. Even the legislators, forced by tradition to sit and listen while their governor offers them his state of the state, must privately agree that he is speaking the truth. However, they can hardly admit it out loud, and certainly cannot assist him in his noble last gesture.

What he is telling us is that the job of government is to provide services to its citizens, not to provide jobs to New Yorkers. He is forcing us to acknowledge that there are two fundamentally different and opposing views of government.

One view of government is that it should provide only those services that cannot be adequately, affordably and efficiently provided by the private sector. For instance, I believe a public education, offered to everyone regardless of their ability to pay, enriches us all. Others may rightly quarrel that the gains of such universal education are frittered away in the inefficiencies of institutions providing that education. The validity of each opposing viewpoint is a legitimate debate to have, even if I remain unprepared to throw the educated baby out with the bathwater.

However, it is more difficult to articulate a vision in which government's job is to create jobs, regardless of the utility and the necessity of such jobs.

This is a state in which public employees spend great sums advertising how many of them are on the public payroll. In many other states, such advertising would be considered negative. And we see a slew of Speakouts explaining that our public servants work hard enough to deserve to retire at the age of 40 with lifetime benefits — as if the rest of our economy deserves something less.

Gov. Paterson may finally be speaking the truth in a way that I find most refreshing and liberating. One less cynical might conclude he is only doing so out of a desperate attempt to get reelected. I don't think so. It seems to me that even a most dysfunctional political adviser would not be telling him there is much chance of reelection. No, I believe he is finally free to tell us like it is.

If only we can listen. There is a lot of work to be done to return the Empire State to the economic greatness once known around the world. The citizens of this state know that, even if many think change is good, but only for someone else.

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