



The Power of Ideas

An Interview with **The Honorable Christopher J. Christie, Governor of New Jersey**

EDITORS' NOTE *New Jersey Governor Chris Christie graduated from the University of Delaware in 1984 and attended Seton Hall University School of Law, graduating in 1987. He then joined a Cranford law firm and soon was named a partner. He was elected a Freeholder in Morris County and served as Director of the Board in 1997. Christie was named U.S. Attorney for the District of New Jersey in 2002. He left the U.S. Attorney's office on December 1, 2008 and was sworn in as New Jersey's 55th Governor on January 19, 2010.*



The Hon. Christopher J. Christie

Why should companies invest in New Jersey and what are you doing to encourage this investment?

The first thing that every businessperson has told me they want more than anything else is certainty as to what their costs are going to be over the next few years so they can plan accordingly in terms of levels of employment and their capital investment. And the one thing they can be certain about New Jersey, at least over the next three years, is that their taxes aren't going up. That is the first thing that will be attractive.

Second, there are a number of things in the budget I presented that will begin to lower taxes for businesses in New Jersey. We made a small down payment on that last year and we're going to make a bigger one this year.

Third is that we're lowering the regulatory cost of doing business in New Jersey. This year, our first full year in charge, there are a third fewer regulations than there were in the last year of the previous governor.

Business folks have been telling me all along that not only taxes, but also the regulatory costs, are what drive them away from New Jersey. So we're in the process of lowering that as well.

In short, New Jersey's attraction is certainty that your costs going forward, both from a tax and regulatory perspective, are going to be moving in the right direction, not the wrong direction.

President Eisenhower once said that when he was the leader of the Army, he would give an order and it would get done right away, but when he was President, he would give an order and it would take months to get done.

Yes, I have a similar feeling from having been U.S. Attorney. When I was U.S. Attorney, I would give directives and they would get done quickly, and here, it's significantly less responsive. But that is just the nature of the job. The challenge from a leadership perspective is to adjust your style to the circumstance you're in, while others adjust because there is a new person in this job. There is a little of both going on.

You've been bold with initiatives, but to get them passed, it comes back to working with both parties. Have you been surprised by how partisan New Jersey is and are you optimistic you can get the understanding across about the need to work together?

We already have. We passed a budget that reduced spending by 9 percent, a property tax cap, and a cap on interest arbitration awards with a Democratically controlled legislature. So you can.

You can't be focused on personalities – you have to be focused on the power of ideas. If you can articulate the power of the ideas the right way, folks will support you, regardless of party.

We're never going to get over partisanship and I don't think it's a terrible thing unless it gets to the point where it prevents you from getting anything done.

Sometimes, we're going to have principle disagreements on things, and that is why our government has checks and balances to prevent the tyranny of the majority.

There are elements of the legislature that really want to work together regardless of party. There are some who are going to be bitter, aggressive partisans. I tend to ignore those folks, because they don't add anything to the mix.

Do you like fighting and how do you pick your fights?

There has been an obsession among the media on whether I'm too tough or combative.

I'm not someone who enjoys conflict by nature. But I pick my fights based upon what I believe are the most important things to me. You have to be willing to fight for those things and speak plainly.

There is a misconception of me that I like to fight just to fight. Given my choice, I'd rather have people get along.

But my mother taught me a long time ago that if you have a choice between love and respect, take respect, because sometimes respect can turn to love, but love that you get without respect is fleeting.

So in picking what things you're willing to fight for, even if people disagree with you, they'll respect you for standing up for the things consistently that you believe in.

Then eventually, if they like what you're doing, the love will come.

How critical has it been to encourage public/private partnership to address many of these issues?

One of the most eye-opening components of the job for me in the first year has been the lack of communication between the Governor's office and the business community in the state.

Once every two weeks, I have three or four CEO calls to make – a few inside the state and a couple outside the state – to those who are thinking about coming here. They're shocked the Governor would pick up the phone and call them. I ask how they're doing and what we can do to help them, and I tell them to call me if they have a problem.

So part of this is not just policy; it's also attitude and approach. That is the easiest thing to change, because you don't need to spend money to change it. It's a matter of leadership and letting people know what is expected of them in these jobs.

For instance, the new commissioner for the Department of Environmental Protection, one of the most anti-business departments in the state, required that everyone of their over 3,000 employees attend customer service training. That will help change attitudes there a bit and it also sends a powerful message to the business community.

One of your key pillars has been education. How much can you change in this area, and why, with so much talk of reform, is it still not happening?

As Governor, you can do more to change and reform education than any other job in the country, because most states run the predominant policy mechanisms for K-12 education in their states.

You're going to see a lot of change in New Jersey in the next year or two.

The first year was spent articulating why it's necessary and my arguments with the teachers union have been about laying out the case

to the public about why we should care more about the children than we care about the adults.

Now we've set the stage for reform. When I came in, there was no discussion of education reform in New Jersey. Now we're in a situation where there is serious conversation about it.

There is a bill to set up a scholarship program for public school students to go to private and parochial school that is very close to passage now. Before I became Governor, that idea was knocking around for seven or eight years and going nowhere. Now we're moving it.

So you're going to see a lot in terms of educational reform of tenure, merit pay, the ending of last in/first out – all those rules that make adults more comfortable, but which are counter-effective in the education of children.

It must be frustrating and hurtful to try to do your best in a job and yet get knocked all the time by the media.

It rarely gets to me; I've grown a much thicker skin over time. The campaign helped with that. When you get outspent three-to-one by your opponent and the campaign is mostly negative, you can either get a thicker skin or get out.

There is some criticism that is valid and you need to listen to that since you can never begin to believe you have the answers to every question, because you don't.

In terms of whether it ever gets hurtful or frustrating, when I get to feeling that way, I do two things: I consider the source and their motivation, and I try to laugh about it. Some of the people criticizing me, especially outside of New Jersey, don't even know me, so you have to let that roll off your back.

I pay attention to criticism and take from it what is useful, and the stuff that is not useful, I throw away. If you let them get to you, then you're going to change who you are in reaction to that and that's not an effective way to lead.

Communications, whether it's in public life or business, is a key element. Where did you learn to be such a good speaker?

My parents encouraged us to do a lot of reading and the first step in being an effective verbal communicator is to be an effective written communicator, and the first step in that is to be a good reader.

There are also certain native skills people have and I have no idea where mine came from but I have them.

Another thing about communication is, to be effective, it has to be authentic. I have read fewer than five prepared speeches since I've been Governor. I speak from my gut. When people see you reading, they believe, rightly or wrongly, that it's less genuine.

It's about being who you are and not trying to figure out how to say something to appear effective.

A lot of young people are aware that leaders are often attacked. What do you tell them to keep them in New Jersey and encourage them to be active in the system?

New Jersey has the second highest per capita income of any state in the country, because historically, we've been a state that has given



people the opportunity to be really successful based on the educated workforce and infrastructure we have. But over the past decade, we have become a business unfriendly state.

I tell young people that leadership makes a huge difference in this regard and that it makes a big difference who is in charge of the state government. So they now see that business, entrepreneurship, and risk-taking are being celebrated and rewarded by this administration.

So if they're looking for a state in which to be catalyst for comeback from a business perspective, New Jersey is a great place, because the government is going to be supportive and there is a history of success in the past that we're building on. Both of those are things that New Jersey uniquely offers.

With what you went through with the campaign, are you concerned that the next generation of leaders may not want to serve?

It does concern me, but it isn't any worse than it has been historically. America has a history of having sharp-elbowed politics. It doesn't make it right, but we've always had good people who are willing to step forward and serve.

So I don't think we'll have a lack of people who want to take leadership positions. But the obligation of the people who are fortunate enough to have those positions is to be attentive to what is coming up, so I do a lot of speaking at schools, both at the K-12 and university level, on the good things about service.

It had an enormous effect on me in the ninth grade when Assemblyman Tom Kean spoke to my junior high school class about the fact that he would run for Governor in 1977 and the plans he had for the state. It made me

even more interested in the possibility of a life in public service. So you don't know what kind of seed you can plant with a kid.

I wish our campaigns were focused more on substance and less on personalities and personal attacks. But I know from being a student of history that is just wishful thinking and you have to be tough in this business. It doesn't mean you enjoy it, but you survive it.

Are you surprised by how quickly the national attention has come and as pressure to run for President continues, how hard will it be to resist it?

It surprises me that it has come at all and the pace of it surprises me even more. This was not a strategy of ours coming in. We resisted it in the beginning because we had too much to do.

But I enjoy the attention it gives to the state and the state is now becoming known for something different than it was known for before. We're now known for fiscal discipline, straight talk, and tough leadership, so I'm enjoying that part of it.

In terms of resisting the pressure, I'm not ready to be President. So the pressure to run for office is flattering, but it doesn't turn my head because I know who I am.

I have not felt for a day as if I wasn't up to doing this job. If I walked into the Oval Office today, I don't know that I could say the same thing. If and when I were ever to seek that job, I'd want to do it believing in my heart and my mind that I was absolutely ready for the job.

But as long as the attention continues to be good for New Jersey, that is fine by me. ●

Governor Christie holds a Town Hall meeting on the Reform Agenda in the Villeroy & Boch Warehouse in Monroe, New Jersey