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State Reports

Connecticut Politics Tectonic Shifts in the Land of Steady Habits

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2010 will go down as a year when the ground shook in Connecticut politics. What is most interesting is that the changes were not simply (or even) due to the underlying budgetary and economic challenges affecting the state and the nation. In many ways, Connecticut has had a perfect storm of political dominoes falling, often in ways that people would never have believed before they occurred. While many of the effects will continue to play out in the next six months and beyond, the actual and metaphorical faces of Connecticut political leadership have already undergone a transformation.

Currently, Democrats control all five federal congressional seats. Democrats continue to dominate Connecticut politics at the federal level, though not without Republican and independent challenges that may be significant for the 2010 midterm elections. Overall, though, that Democratic dominance has been relatively profound and may well persist for the foreseeable future. The last congressional Republican, Chris Shays, lost his seat to Democrat Jim Himes in 2008. Democrat Christopher Dodd remains the senior US Senator from Connecticut but he announced, in January 2010, that he would not seek reelection. Joe Lieberman continues to serve as the junior US Senator from Connecticut in the capacity following his successful 2008 candidacy on the Connecticut for Lieberman ballot. Prior to Lieberman, Lowell Wiecker, Jr. had been the only Republican to represent the Republicans in Congress since Senator Prescott Bush

(father of former President George H. W. Bush and grandfather of former President George W. Bush) had retired from the seat in 1963.

At the state level, the handling of the state's budget difficulties has been a story of standoffs, compromises, and deferred decision making. While the state now has a budget that will be technically balanced through the 2011 fiscal year, there is no guarantee (and much doubt) that the budget will remain balanced, given the unpredictability of actual revenue intake by the state. The FY 10 and FY 11 budgets were both balanced with a substantial dependence on federal stimulus funds (some not yet received) and borrowing against future revenues. Unless there is a substantial increase in state revenues by 2011, the outlook for the 2012 fiscal year is grim. This fiscal situation will have profound policy consequences for many government services and the status of public sector employees. After a great deal of political tensions and some gubernatorial vetoes, the current budget agreements were reached by compromises between the Democratic legislature and the outgoing Republican governor, Jodi Rell; the minority Republicans in the legislature were largely shut out of a meaningful role in the budget process, to their great annoyance. This budget and policy outlook is the first (and most obvious) tectonic shift in Connecticut governance, with consequences still largely on the horizon.

Symbiotically related to the budget and policy challenges and changes are the major retirements in Connecticut political leadership in 2010. Chief among these are U.S. Senator Christopher Dodd, retiring after 30 years, and Governor Jodi Rell, retiring after 6 years in office. The prospect of an open U.S. Senate seat and an open Governor's chair in the same election cycle has set off a chain of candidacies and further (apparently) open offices that is still playing out as this article is written. Three of Connecticut's other Constitutional offices (Attorney General, Comptroller and Secretary Of The State) are now open races as their current occupants are pursuing higher offices. With some legislators pursuing these offices, open seats will cascade down to the legislature and even local government. In essence, this will be the largest change of the

makeup of Connecticut's top public officials (potentially including key changes in partisan control) in decades, certainly a tectonic shift of its own.

Perhaps the most noteworthy tectonic shift, however, is the highly fluid and unpredictable way in which the 2010 electoral races have played out compared to initial expectations. If one were to diagram the predicted candidates and compare it to actual events, thus far, the contrasts would appear to be striking and tectonic. In the Governor's race, when Governor Rell announced her decision to not seek reelection, one of the early and leading Democratic contenders was Secretary Of the State Susan Bysiewicz. Then Senator Dodd chose to retire, and the current Attorney General, Richard Blumenthal, declared for the U.S. Senate, leading Secretary Bysiewicz to drop her gubernatorial bid and declare for Attorney General. At that point, many Connecticut politicians would have predicted Blumenthal and Bysiewicz as substantial favorites in their races.

What a difference a few months makes. While Blumenthal still has a strong position at this moment, he has been suddenly put on the defensive by past statements in which he (in his characterization, "unintentionally") mischaracterized the nature of his military service during the Vietnam Era. It is still too early to gauge the long term political impact of this controversy but, at the very least, it has punctured the sense of inevitability around his candidacy. Few would have predicted this dynamic earlier in the year.

In Bysiewicz's case, her candidacy encountered a more technical - but far more devastating and final-roadblock. One of the requirements for serving as Attorney General is "10 years of active legal practice". While Bysiewicz claimed her duties as Secretary if the State met this requirement, the Republican Party challenged her candidacy in court, and the issue became widely discussed and controversial. After a contentious trial, a lower court ruled in Bysiewicz' favor, but this was overturned by a 7-0 ruling from the State Supreme Court on May 18. While expressing deep disappointment, Secretary Bysiewicz stated she would accept the ruling. In such a way

did another prominent Connecticut leader find political plans to be changed by unexpected circumstances.

Thus, 2010 has left Connecticut politics at a major crossroads. The budgetary and policy outlook is uncertain at best, grim at worst. Two major leadership positions in the state, Governor and U.S. Senator, will be occupied by new blood, potentially from the nonincumbent party in both cases. Both races have nomination contests in both major political parties that may be ugly and expensive. When combined with changes in other statewide offices, and the general anti-incumbent mood, there is the potential for a sea change in the leadership and direction of the state. When an ancient Chinese sage once said “may you live in interesting times,” he certainly could have meant something like the state of Connecticut politics in 2010.