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In a Moment of Crisis, A Chance for Reform

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Come November barring another political bombshell we'll have acting Gov. Richard Codey running New Jersey. For the record, Codey was re-elected with the support of just 17,220 voters in Essex County last year. He'll take over the expired term of Gov. James E. McGreevey by virtue of his Senate presidency.

Just three years ago, it was acting Governor Donald DiFrancesco who was elevated to fill out the remainder of Christie Whitman's term. As he prepared to assume perhaps the most powerful governorship in the nation, only one in 10 New Jersey residents said they felt they knew either a lot or something about him; the *Star-Ledger*/Eagleton-Rutgers Poll found that only 11 percent of Garden State residents had an opinion about him.

There is no way this can be a healthy situation. The governor should be elected by the citizenry and we will again be falling short of this basic standard of representative democracy. Surely this must fray an increasingly thin strand that links the government to the governed. Surely it reinforces the public's cynicism.

The time has come for fundamental reform of the political system. We need an elected lieutenant governor in New Jersey and we should consider changing the state's constitution to provide for other statewide elected officeholders as well.

The last few years would be comical if they weren't so tragic. We've now lived through DiFrancesco's forced exit from the stage in 2001 over personal financial dealings, U.S. Senator Robert Torricelli's withdrawal from his re-election campaign in 2002 because of ethical failings, Essex County Executive James Treffinger's jailing for fraud and obstruction last year and now McGreevey's abrupt departure in 2004.

We are among the most educated and affluent states in the nation. Why do we find ourselves consumed by scandal after scandal? These are simply too many crises in too short a time to not raise the question of whether something might not be fundamentally wrong with our political system.

I've been observing New Jersey politics for more than 25 years now, and it's hard not to detect an arrogance of power in this state. Politics is practiced mainly by middle-aged white men who agree on the rules of the game. Insider trading is the norm, "pay to play" is accepted as a system of campaign finance, and money speaks too loudly for the common good.

The structural problems are obvious. There is too much power vested in the governor; there is too much money coming from too few people, giving them too much power, and there is too little accountability and oversight from independent political actors. The press can only do so much.

The political system in New Jersey has let us down. As a public, we deserve better. For starters, let's think about having more than one constitutionally elected statewide official. Adding the elected offices of at least a lieutenant governor and attorney general would be a major step in the right direction.

Currently the governor appoints all other statewide officials - treasurer, secretary of state and attorney general, among others. These are often elected positions in other states. And of course, we have no lieutenant governor. As Lord Acton observed, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

In my years, we've been blessed with honest and ethical chief executives from both parties - Brendan Byrne, Tom Kean, Jim Florio and Christie Whitman. But there is no guarantee the system will produce them, and in our increasingly money-driven system there is more temptation to bend an ear in the wrong direction.

Even with honest governors, pay to play has flourished in Democratic and Republican administrations alike. The governor of New Jersey has simply become too strong for the times.

So one reason for additional elected state officials is to diffuse power a little bit. Winning elections confers legitimacy on officeholders. This grants them their own constituents and bases of power, not to mention official positions from which to speak independently of the governor's office.

It also provides additional watchdogs over other political actors in state government. The threat of exposure is itself a great deterrent. It can make wrong-headed acts never happen by the law of anticipated consequences.

Second, of course, an elected lieutenant governor would be seen as a more legitimate replacement for a governor unable to fill out his or her term. The person would have won a statewide election, rather than one of 40 seats in the state Senate, and, importantly, would have gone through a vetting process by the press during the election campaign.

DiFrancesco's problems started after he became acting governor and received more scrutiny than he faced in his Senate campaigns. Having run for statewide office is not a guarantee there are no skeletons in the closet, but it certainly is a helpful process.

Third, having an elected attorney general would make the state's chief law enforcement official accountable to voters rather than the governor, which should work to help restore trust in the political system.

Finally, having other elected statewide offices would give us stepping-stone positions and help the public become familiar with the state's political leaders. With only the governor and U.S. senators elected statewide, politicians seem to come out of nowhere - think of U.S. Senator Jon Corzine, Whitman, McGreevey - before being elected to major offices. Having additional offices on the ballot would allow voters to become familiar with candidates over time, and for politicians to build longer resumes of public service.

Fundamental political change comes only out of crisis. Let's put this one to good use. It is time for reform now in the hope, as former President Jimmy Carter has said, that we can get a government as good as its people.