



Poor judgment from the governor

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By Paul Mulshine/The Star Ledger

(Note: This is my Sunday column.)

Many are touting our governor as a guy who's got the ability to be the next leader of the free world.

He's got to get out of Morris County first.

In his failed attempt to move a state assemblyman to a seat on the bench in his own county, Chris Christie offered up an example of political bungling perhaps unprecedented in New Jersey political history. Christie screwed this one up so completely and so thoroughly that, by week's end, his political enemies were muttering that it must have been part of a conspiracy.

It was: a conspiracy of dunces.

The bungling began last year when the moderate from Morris County took office. In his first few months as governor, Christie had yet to reinvent himself as the darling of conservatives all over America. Instead, he did a lot of the things that were to be expected of a moderate, such as agreeing to let the New Jersey State Bar Association vet his judicial nominees.

George W. Bush made a lot of mistakes, but he didn't make that one. Upon taking over as chief executive of the United States, Bush told the members of the American Bar Association that their opinions on judicial nominees were no longer needed. As a result, the current makeup of the federal courts represents the sole bright spot in what turned out to be an otherwise dismal presidency.

Christie, however, made an agreement with the New Jersey State Bar Association that judicial nominees must first go before a bar association screening committee before their nominations go to the state Senate. This is the equivalent of permitting the New Jersey Education Association to screen school superintendents, but Christie did it anyway.



Frank H. Conlon/For The Star-Ledger
Assemblyman Michael Patrick Carroll

That set the switches for the train wreck that occurred last week.

On Friday of the prior week, Christie announced he was nominating Assemblyman Michael Patrick Carroll to the state Superior Court in Morris County. Moving Carroll to the court looked like a twofer for Christie: Carroll is perhaps the most consistently conservative legislator in Trenton, so Christie would get credit for putting a conservative on the bench. Meanwhile, he'd also get Carroll out of the Assembly, where he has a nasty habit of pointing out that Christie's budgets are bad for the 'burbs.

When the nomination was announced, all the insiders assumed the gov had his ducks in a row. In fact, he'd left those ducks all over the pond — and the lawyers were using them for target practice. Carroll got quite a grilling when he went before the 25-member bar association screening committee on that Friday. The following Wednesday, he learned that Christie was withdrawing the nomination.

What happened in between?

"I have no idea," said state Sen. Nick Scutari on Thursday.

Scutari, a Democrat from Union County, chairs the state Senate Judiciary Committee. I cornered him after a session at which the Carroll nomination was supposed to have been heard. A lot of Republicans were blaming the Democrats for deep-sixing the Carroll nomination, but Scutari pleaded innocent.

"We never said we wouldn't hear him," Scutari said. All the Democrats said, Scutari told me, was that they wanted to wait to hear from the state bar association before they took action. You can hardly blame them for that, since "the governor signed the compact with the bar association," he said.

He did indeed, though he didn't have to. Like Bush, Christie could have pointed out the conflict of interest involved in giving lawyers a say in picking judges. Instead, he agreed to give the lawyers that oversight — and then withdrew the Carroll nomination before they even weighed in on it.

What was he thinking? Christie's not talking. Conservatives are, however. They're outraged by what they considered the shoddy treatment of a guy who is universally respected on the right.

"Mike Carroll would have been a great addition to the judiciary," said Steve Lonegan, the former mayor of Bogota who lost to Christie in the 2009 GOP gubernatorial primary. "If all we're going to do is go with judges approved by the liberal bar association, then we're going to have nothing but liberal judges."

And those judges have been responsible for the aforementioned budgets that shortchange the suburbs. Christie has promised that he eventually will change the makeup of the state Supreme Court. Last week, he showed he can't even change the court in his own county.

Maybe he'll do better in Washington. He certainly can't do worse.

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