



## State's vexed by a leadership crisis

By Charles D. Chieppo

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At least it can't get much worse, I keep telling myself. After a decade in and around state government, my faith in the institution is at an all-time low.

The budget and patronage are common threads that connect the causes of my frustration, but the bigger issue is one of leadership.

One definition of patronage is control of appointment to government jobs. In and of itself, there's nothing wrong with it. Elected officials need the power to put in place a team of their choosing to carry out their policies. Further, there are plenty of politically connected individuals who are perfectly qualified for the positions they seek.

But then there's the dark side of patronage, the type for which Massport has become the poster child in the days since September 11<sup>th</sup>.

During a press conference at which she accepted the Carter Commission's recommendations for reforming Massport, Governor Swift was asked the obvious question: If a moratorium on patronage is needed at Massport, how about the Massachusetts District Commission (whose very existence is a testament to the dangers of patronage) or the MBTA?

Instead of seizing the opportunity, the Governor turned defensive and resorted to political speak about dealing only with the issue at hand.

While the horrors of September 11<sup>th</sup> fell on Massport's shoulders, it is in fact the MBTA that is far more vulnerable to terrorist attack. Will it take a suicide bomber at rush hour for state officials to get serious about cutting patronage at that bloated authority?

Then there's the judiciary, which is the Legislature's Massport. It was the source of about \$20 million of the cuts that were needed to balance the commonwealth's new budget. Each year the trial court's chief justice for administration and management sends a budget and staffing request to the Governor and Legislature. Each year the Legislature ignores the request and creates more high-paid assistant clerk, assistant register, and probation officer positions than the judiciary requests. All, of course, are plum patronage jobs.

This fiscal year alone, Massachusetts taxpayers will pay \$16.5 million for 382 judiciary personnel hired between fiscal 1998 and 2001 that are by definition unnecessary. In all likelihood, going back just one more year to lay off those hired to patronage positions in the judiciary since FY '97 would fill the entire \$20 million gap. Now Chief Administrative Justice Barbara Dortch-Okara faces a difficult decision.

Should she make the easier political call and fill the gap by laying off clerical workers, or risk offending the legislators who control even the most minute details of her budget by laying off patronage hires?

In addition to the moral issue of forcing the lowest-paid and most vulnerable workers to bear the brunt of lay-offs, there is a practical issue for the trial court. It is clerical workers who keep the courts' work flowing. But since the low-paying nature of their jobs make them largely exempt from patronage, these clerical positions have the lowest staffing levels in the judiciary and are least able to absorb cuts. In addition, three clerical workers making \$23,000 must be laid off to achieve the same savings as cutting one \$69,000 assistant clerk.

Other recent budget moves fail to pass the smell test. Just last month, the Legislature and Governor provided private dog racing tracks with a \$5 million bailout. At almost the same time, local school systems were ordered to cut 300 public health nurses to save \$10 million. Even during the best of times, these two moves taken

together would cause observers to shake their heads. But the convergence of a budget shortfall and a new awareness of the threats posed by chemical and biological terrorism make these choices truly mind-boggling.

In a democracy, we get exactly the government we deserve. A little more than a decade ago, Massachusetts citizens rose up and insisted that our elected representatives do better. The result was a period of remarkable improvement in state government.

During this difficult period we must once again demand that state officials rise above petty politics and lead. It is, after all, what we elect them to do.

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