

Carl Golden / Christie already showing signs of lame-duck disease

Posted: Tuesday, December 10, 2013 12:01 am

Gov. Chris Christie's second inaugural is some six weeks distant, but tiny stress fractures are beginning to appear in the impregnable foundation constructed in his first term.

All governors become lame ducks the instant they are re-elected. But with increasing speculation that he'll leave office before his term expires to pursue the 2016 Republican presidential nomination, the chatter within the political classes about Christie maintaining his unchallenged political dominance will reach higher decibel levels.

In his first term, he established himself as the state's most influential figure, effectively crowding out other voices and exerting near total control while the Legislature stood in his shadow.

In second gubernatorial terms, the pressure on legislators to acquiesce to a governor's agenda eases. The need to build a record with mid-term and end-of-term elections in mind loses intensity with the knowledge that the governor's influence over those elections is weaker because he won't be a participant.

The fear of political retaliation for breaking with discipline imposed by the administration is diminished.

The first hint that the solid front was a little less so occurred shortly after Christie's re-election when he became involved in an ill-advised coup attempt to oust Senate Minority Leader Tom Kean Jr. Republican senators, resentful of what they viewed as interference in a legislative prerogative, rebelled and re-elected Kean.

It led to a public scolding of Christie by former Gov. Tom Kean Sr., whose irritation reverberated through the political establishment and set observers to pondering whether the elder Kean would use his influence in national circles to raise questions about a Christie presidential bid.

Days later, the administration was engulfed in controversy when Christie revealed he intended to veto the state version of the so-called DREAM Act, which would offer in-state tuition at public colleges to students who were brought to the United States as children by parents who emigrated illegally. During his campaign, Christie repeatedly told Hispanics he supported the idea, a pledge that led to his winning a majority of the Latino vote.

His veto threat, he said, was based on what he described as deficiencies that made the law overly generous and unfair. Critics pounced, calling his position a betrayal and his claims to support the bill a cynical campaign ploy. His opposition now, they said, was designed to impress conservative national Republicans to whom DREAM Act proposals are unacceptable.

Even his re-election victory was muddied up when Republican Atlantic County Assemblyman Chris Brown suggested in a radio interview that Christie had struck a bargain with South Jersey Democratic leader George Norcross to remain a bystander in legislative contests in the region, leaving Republican candidates and challengers on their own.

Brown, whose comments reflected privately whispered criticisms about the governor's lack of coattails, quickly backpedaled, but the damage was done. It was, some said, the classic definition of a gaffe: When a politician inadvertently blurts out the truth.

While the administration signaled that it intended to pursue a tax cut in the 2014 legislative session, the Department of the Treasury revealed revenues were lagging estimates by about \$150 million, a modest sum at this stage but sufficient to raise questions about the advisability of a tax cut.

The shortfall renewed debate over the state's overall economic health as critics pointed to an unemployment rate above 8 percent - higher than the national average and highest in the region - an increase in the number of families living in poverty and a growth rate that has recovered barely half the jobs lost in the recession.

The fiscal 2014-15 budget is due in February amid early concerns that mandated expenditures, such as a contribution of more than \$1 billion to the state pension fund, will outstrip the ability to pay and force cost cutting in other areas.

Christie has enjoyed considerable success and has drawn wide recognition for his dealing with fiscal issues - in particular, avoiding tax increases. But the budget that awaits him appears to be one of the more difficult he's faced.

His ability to convince legislators to continue to support program cuts will be tested greatly by those who no longer feel compelled to go along with a governor who may not be here in two years and who definitely won't be here in little more than four years.

Christie governed like a force of nature in his first term, and it is indisputable that he has succeeded. A 22-point victory - even over a badly overmatched opponent who didn't enjoy the solid support of her party - polished his reputation as a leader who can get things done.

In this coming year, however, it may turn out that the faint quacking sound off in the distance is the distress call of the lame duck.

Carl Golden is a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey.