

OPINION: CAN SEN. TOM KEAN JR. REGROUP BATTERED REPUBLICANS?

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Ironically, given the Republican rout, Minority Leader Kean Jr. could help his party deliver a viable alternative to the governor-elect's left-of-center predilections



Forty-four years ago, Brendan Byrne was elected New Jersey governor, amassing a record plurality of 721,378 votes and, in the process, driving the Republican membership in the General Assembly to a historic low — 14 seats.

The partisan divide — 66 Democrats and 14 Republicans — meant the Democratic Party held 83 percent of the seats in the Assembly. For every one Republican, there were five Democrats. It was the kind of electoral beatdown that is almost impossible to absorb and still survive.

Senate Republicans were spared the devastation because the state Senate was not on the ballot that year.

The leader of this tiny band of Assembly Republicans was Tom Kean, an Essex County Assemblyman who served as speaker in the two years prior to Byrne's landslide.

Ironically, it was Kean 12 years later who surpassed Byrne's plurality, winning re-election in 1985 by 794,229 votes, a victory margin unlikely to ever be exceeded.

Unable to influence policy or win legislative approval for their proposals, Republicans looked to Kean to go up against the majority and establish ~~MMMM~~ ~~bsj~~ ~~ar~~.

He is experienced, articulate, moderate in his political ideology, and pragmatic in his approach to issues.

Gov.-elect Phil Murphy has been clear, both during his campaign and in public appearances since, that his administration will move farther to the left, embracing tax and spending increases and pursuing a host of new or expanded social programs at an as-yet-undetermined cost.

His agenda provides fertile ground for Kean to establish Republicans as fiscally sensitive and seriously concerned about the impact of Murphy's agenda on middle-income New Jerseyans.

There is a great deal for Kean to confront and offer alternative viable ideas, avoiding the risk of Republicans becoming the party of "no," opposing the governor merely for the sake of opposing him.

He can be an effective counterbalance to Murphy's left-of-center agenda, aggressively pursuing a more moderate, responsible approach rather than a rigid ideological one.

Kean has demonstrated his leadership qualities, holding his caucus together on tough votes while effectively arguing his party's case for fiscal restraint and austere government.

With a Republican governor and a solidly Democratic Legislature, Kean has been an effective spokesman for his party, possessing an ability to navigate the often hblomes, rese thizeffingstr ar e
effectively among the oft times, reernor t. rnR D.

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