

OPINION: LET'S BE REAL, SCANDAL INVESTIGATION WILL FREEZE TRENTON

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Select committee examination of Murphy administration's hiring practices will overshadow all else



Despite repeated assurances from the Democratic legislative leadership that business as usual will prevail while the investigation into the hiring practices of the Murphy administration goes forward, the odds of timely approval of significant items on the governor's agenda are long, indeed.

The "we can walk and chew gum at the same time" rationale advanced by the leadership was an effort to calm jittery nerves over the extent of the select committee investigation and to send a message that the committee's probe was nothing out of the ordinary and should be considered merely a normal reaction to allegations of improper behavior by a prominent administration official.

One can admire the attempt at spin to minimize the potential political impact, but scandals invariably dominate the political and media environment, overshadowing all else and, in their most serious and sensationalized form, bring normal government operations to a halt.

The investigation's dominance has been guaranteed by the involvement of high-profile participants — former Attorney General and Supreme Court Justice Peter Verniero named by the governor to review the issue; prominent defense attorney Michael Critchley named by Senate President Steve Sweeney (D-Gloucester) to advise the Senate members of the committee, and former Attorney General Christopher Porrino selected by Murphy to advise his office as the investigation proceeds.

Once the news broke that Albert Alvarez had quietly and suddenly resigned from his \$140,000-a-year post as chief of staff to the Schools Development Authority a day ahead of public accusations that he had sexually assaulted a campaign co-worker in 2017, the legislative leadership had no option but to become involved and order an investigation.

Refusing to act or making a case that it was an issue involving the administration and dealing with it was, therefore, the responsibility of the governor's office would have produced an outcry that the Legislature did not view the allegations with the seriousness they deserved and was, in fact, eager to dismiss them entirely.

While in some quarters, an investigation produced some apprehension — largely because it is impossible to predict where it would lead or who it would ensnare — others were quietly gleeful at the prospect of taking a nip or two out of the political hide of the administration.

The rather rocky relationship between the governor, his staff and the Legislature is common knowledge and, for some, the opportunity to publicly embarrass the chief executive and raise questions about the competence and political smarts of his immediate circle was too tempting to

