

# **M. Charles Bakst: State of the state: It's Carcieri's night -- and the first lady's**

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*Notebook. Republican Gov. Don Carcieri delivers his State of the State speech to the Democratic-dominated General Assembly and a television audience. The House chamber, Wednesday, Jan. 25.*

Mr. Upbeat versus Mr. Sourpuss.

If this is the way the 2006 race between Carcieri and Democratic Lt. Gov. Charlie Fogarty is going to play out, the governor is going to win handily.

Carcieri came across as crisp, proud, enthusiastic, accomplished. Through message, gestures, and stagecraft reminiscent of the playbook of Ronald Reagan and his handlers, this was Morning in Rhode Island.

"Jobs are GROWING. Investment is BOOMING. Incomes are RISING . . . More Rhode Islanders are working than ever before. We are the New England leader . . . keep this entire momentum going . . . reduce the tax burden."

(Yes, there are storm clouds on the horizon . . . welfare cuts ahead, etc. . . . but tonight he'll slide by with some vague references to them and get on with the good stuff.)

Carcieri said in an interview that he's upbeat because the facts warrant it: "There's a lot of good news."

A popular governor, things sound great, and first lady Sue Carcieri comes up at the end of the speech and leads everyone in singing God Bless America.

It's a tall order for challenger Fogarty to handle. Carcieri showcases himself in the most favorable light. Fogarty is left to carp and criticize, to say things are not as rosy as they sound, to accuse the incumbent of failing to follow through on past promises, like whatever happened to his proposal last year to funnel \$20 million in new money for college scholarships? (The governor says he can't make the Assembly do stuff.)

Fogarty slams Carcieri for not achieving more on health care, says the number of Rhode Islanders covered by insurance actually has dropped. "We need to turn that around." Etc.

If nothing else, Fogarty has to be punchier -- maybe something like, "What's up? Well, slot machines are up. But manufacturing jobs are down, and if you're at minimum wage, God help you, because Carcieri vetoed your raise."

The governor this night floats a proposal to merge the Providence, Pawtucket, and Central Falls school districts. Fogarty says he wants to know more about it but, "The danger in school reform is that people propose something to give the impression of change and nothing really changes."

Carcieri's speech is like a slick half-hour infomercial; I'm surprised the stations, instead of carrying it for free, don't charge his campaign for the air time. But Fogarty has to be envious and worried, no? Doesn't he see how Carcieri could dazzle people and run circles around him?

Fogarty says voters want to get beyond the rhetoric. They worry about health care and the costs of college. And Carcieri's job creation record really isn't so dramatic. Fogarty declares, "Rhode Island is a great state with incredible potential but we can do better . . . My message is going to be one of hope and optimism but it's also going to be one of comparing a record of results vs. promises that have been unfulfilled."

Democratic Sen. Elizabeth Roberts, running for lieutenant governor, said voters will appreciate Fogarty's dissections of Carcieri. "People see that as a positive attribute of leadership. I don't think they see it as a negative when you point out that that's what's missing."

Of course, Carcieri's State House publicity machine -- and yes, all major government officials have such things -- will be glad to supply you with page after page about what he's done. Press secretary Jeff Neal even went to the trouble of highlighting 17 statements from last year's state of the state and noting their aftermath. For instance, the governor said he hoped to see the Westin Hotel sold and it was.

I told Carcieri these were very impressive materials but why should taxpayers have to pay for his press aides to prepare and distribute them? He said he had to get his story out.

Question: So you can get re-elected, is that it?

Answer: No, no, no. To tell people what's going on, because people wonder: What are you doing?

Though it hardly fazed Carcieri, there were, aside from Fogarty's sideline commentary, several other notes of grumbling -- even alarm -- about the speech. For instance, Kate Brewster of the Poverty Institute at Rhode Island College told me, "The governor did talk about making investments in urban school districts, which is wonderful. He also talked about making major cuts and major reforms in welfare. And these parents are going to need the support to keep the kids out of poverty. (Kids Count) just came out with a report that has 1 in 10 children living in extreme poverty, so to talk about cutting welfare right now is devastating."

House Majority Leader Gordon Fox of Providence fumed that combining the Providence, Pawtucket and Central Falls school districts might amount to "warehousing" of poor children, a concern shared by House Finance chairman Steve Costantino, also of Providence. Fox said of the proposal, "Are you lowering the tide rather than raising it?" He said it might be wiser to pair Providence with a wealthier community -- Cranston or East Providence.

When I asked Cranston Senator Roberts what she thought of combining the Cranston and Providence districts, she said mergers are "an overly simplistic approach to the whole problem."

Carcieri is a sunny guy but I rarely have seen him as confident as he was after this speech. When I entered his office he showed off a large, colorful chart -- a fever chart, you might say -- with Rhode Island leading the way in New England job growth rates. To him it was as beautiful and precious as a Monet.

I wondered if it will turn up in a commercial. Now Carcieri mentioned his communications director and said, "Actually, Steve Kass wanted me to hold it up tonight!"

I mentioned that previous governors who tried to regionalize school districts met with grief. Carcieri said the time may be ripe now for the metropolitan district he envisions. He wasn't about to be thrown off stride by the warehousing chatter. He said the three districts have problems -- and families and children who migrate from one city to another. "Every time they move, they go into a different system, different curriculum, they're set back immediately. We know that's kind of a migratory pattern, so why not try to make more uniformity between those districts?"

Now the conversation turned to another speech passage that raised some eyebrows. After introducing two national-award-winning teachers, Diana Petrosinelli

and Andrew Wallace, Carcieri said teachers need support from public officials and even more from parents. The governor declared, "A strong two-parent family, actively engaged in their children's education, is a virtual guarantee of results.

"Less time in front of a TV, and more time reading. That works!"

Well, sure. But what is this, Norman Rockwell?

The governor told me he was well aware of the realities. "The question is how you put programs in place to encourage that kind of behavior and discourage what's been happening, and that's in fact one of the things that we are talking about right now within the human service area, because there are initiatives that have been coming out of Washington, money available for promotion of marriage, for example, training parents, there are things that can be done...We need to move in that direction. Just don't accept the fact that this is the way it is."

When I relayed complaints about his somber/threatening remarks about things like welfare, he said, "Time are tough for everybody," an odd comment from a governor who likes to portray the economy as sizzling. But it is true that the state faces a big deficit. He said, "There's some very tough choices in this budget. There are few good options."

He said he is trying to keep programs like Medicaid "pretty much intact."

Stay tuned for more budget details in coming days.

(In the Senate Democrats' response to the speech, Majority Leader Teresa Paiva Weed said -- correctly -- "As a society we are judged by how we care for the most frail, and America is strong in part because of the safety net citizens can rely upon. In Rhode Island, we know that it is important to maintain those support programs that help our residents gain the skills they need to become self-sufficient -- those that help to feed the hungry among us, and those that help to counter the overwhelmingly negative effects of poverty.")

As the months and years go by, it may be that you'll recall nothing the governor said, but you will remember Sue Carcieri -- who last year had bypass surgery -- and God Bless America. In fact, the governor paid tribute to her and her work -- a wellness initiative etc. -- at the very outset of the speech.

What's the story behind her musical appearance?

The governor said he heard that there was post-state-of-the-state singing in Massachusetts, and he thought it was a great idea. But, "I have a terrible voice" -- he laughed -- "and my wife has got a beautiful voice." (She decided to have Aaron Guckian join her as she stood with her husband. He is the governor's tall advance man, with a booming voice.)

The first lady told me she has a long history of involvement in church singing and local productions of Broadway shows. Indeed, singing was her talent when, as Miss East Greenwich, she finished third in 1960 for the title of Miss Rhode Island.

And what did she sing? "You're not going to believe it," said this Norwegian-American, whose maiden name was Owren. It was the "very melancholy" Solveig's Song, in English, by Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg. "My father had just passed away five months before and I think I was singing it for him. It was kind of a sad song about a man who died."

The governor, of Swedish and Italian stock, wasn't at the competition. But he reports, "A good friend of mine said, 'God, if she sang a song that everybody knew, she would have won.'" He chuckles and adds, "She loves her Norwegian heritage."

M. Charles Bakst is The Journal's political columnist.

[mbakst@projo.com](mailto:mbakst@projo.com) / (401) 277-7638

MULTIMEDIA: Watch Governor Carcieri give his State of the State address, and the closing rendition of "God Bless America," at:

<http://projo.com/governorspeech>