

# Governor Carcieri wages high-profile campaign to sell you his ideas on cuts

01:00 AM EDT on Sunday, October 21, 2007

At the State House on Monday, Governor Carcieri sketched out a plan to cut state spending and avert a budget deficit.

The Providence Journal / Bob Thayer

It's last Tuesday morning, and Don Carcieri is on a tear.

He's on WPRO, and talk show host John DePetro, who's like a straight man to a comedian, serves up a fat question. He asks about a passage in a Providence Journal story about the governor's intention to cut more than 1,000 state jobs.

The Steve Peoples/Katherine Gregg article about Monday's State House announcement said, "The carefully scripted news conference marks the attempt of a governor, with plummeting poll numbers, to take control of the Smith Hill spending debate...and try to rehabilitate his image along the way, according to political observers."

The Republican chief executive fumes to DePetro, "This is not about Don Carcieri. This is about a \$200-million deficit.... It's about what I said yesterday: Are we going to stand up and take responsibility for this and do the hard things? This is not an easy process. I find it just outrageous, outrageous, that someone would suggest that I would outline a program to lay off people and let workers go to rehabilitate my image.... We started on this back in May, worked all summer, so the notion that this is a response to some kind of poll that I pay no attention to — it's just so outrageous, it's so absurd, I mean it's really terrible journalism."

Myself, I thought the writers were on to something. I don't contend Carcieri dreamed up the idea of layoffs in order to have something to talk about. But, since he did dream it up, I do believe he is determined to try every public relations technique at his disposal to sell it and to make himself look good in the process.

Indeed, his appearance on WPRO on Tuesday was part of a media blitz with, generally, a well-honed message. On Tuesday morning, for example, he also was on WRNI, the National Public Radio affiliate.

Like any politician, Carcieri has a standard repertoire of talking points. But some comments he made Wednesday on Helen Glover's WHJJ show seemed extraordinary.

Speaking of his search for jobs the state could do without, Carcieri appeared startled and resentful that one department has eight Spanish-speaking interpreters. He wondered why taxpayers provide translators "for people who want benefits from us." He mentioned his

immigrant Italian grandparents, noted that his grandmother had to learn English, and said that, when necessary, they found a friend or relative to interpret.

Many Rhode Islanders might applaud these Carcieri comments. But in modern-day America, they strike me as insensitive, elitist, and xenophobic.

It is especially grating that the governor talks of people getting benefits “from us.” If the people in question are entitled to benefits, they are as much entitled to them as anyone else, English-speakers or not.

But, for a more rounded glimpse of Carcieri’s chatter about his ideas on cutting the work force and making other savings to attack the looming deficit, let’s start with his live interview on Monday’s 6 p.m. Channel 12 news. His comments to anchors Karen Adams and Steve Aveson typify his story lines.

Carcieri suggested he is heroic. He says, “This is the most difficult thing the state’s ever been through,” which would be a huge surprise to anyone around in, say, 1991, when newly inaugurated Gov. Bruce Sundlun found himself plunged into both the credit-union crisis and a state government fiscal catastrophe.

Carcieri says he’s guarding the gates against those who’d raise taxes.

At his Monday news conference, he declared, “Too many of our families, seniors, young people starting out, and hardworking Rhode Islanders are struggling to pay property taxes, higher gas taxes, high home heating oil prices, as well as their own rising health care costs. Rhode Islanders don’t need higher taxes.”

Actually, as I suggested in a question at the news conference, there is no major raise-taxes movement in the General Assembly. (Afterward, Kate Brewster of Rhode Island College’s Poverty Institute spoke of repealing recently enacted tax cuts and tax credit programs. I admire Brewster, and I could even agree with her, but she hardly represents an entrenched, powerful lobby the governor need fear.)

Nevertheless, hours later, here is Carcieri on Channel 12, saying he won’t hear of raising taxes: “I know what’s facing Rhode Island families today...They’re looking at higher gas bills, higher utility bills, higher health care costs of their own, and they’re staring at property taxes.”

On Tuesday morning, he tells WRNI’s Bob Seay:

“Oh, I know some are talking about we should be raising taxes. I don’t believe that’s the option. When I think of what Rhode Islanders are facing right now with higher heating oil bills, higher gas prices, rising health insurance costs, now’s not the time to lay more taxes on them.”

On WPRO, he again inveighs against tax hikes and says: “I see seniors, they’re friends in my neighborhood, young families and so forth, that are struggling out there right now. They’re watching their gas prices go up, their home heating oil prices go up, their property taxes are rising.”

When DePetro asks what people can do to support Carcieri, the governor replies, “Call their state senator or representative saying, ‘Don’t raise my taxes. I can’t afford to pay any more taxes.’ ”

The governor likes to call on others in state government to share the lead in cutting costs. The Channel 12 newscast reported that Attorney General Patrick Lynch, a Democrat, said his office is underfunded as it is.

Carcieri tells the anchors, “It’s kind of discouraging to get the response that I heard you put on air from the attorney general. Listen, I had heard that from every single one of my departments. They’re all working hard. I understand that. But this is a question of where we’re going to come up with the money.”

Similarly, on WPRO, Carcieri says of Lynch, “He’s not underfunded...Don’t say, ‘We need more money.’ Anybody can do that.”

Although there is a consistency to Carcieri’s comments, there also are contradictions in tone. For example, leading up to Monday’s announcement, he held briefings of sorts for union bigwigs and legislators, two groups he regularly denounces, and during the news conference he sounded several sympathetic notes about state employees: He knows how painful layoffs can be, he wants to respect their privacy and so on.

Indeed, J. Michael Downey, president of Council 94, the largest employee union, told reporters he was happy to see this. “That’s the first time I heard the governor talk about caring about workers,” he said.

On the other hand, Sen. John Tassoni, a Council 94 business agent, slammed the governor for holding a “dog-and-pony show” that lacked specifics.

Now it’s Tuesday morning and Carcieri, on WPRO, brushes off his old riffs about state workers and special interests.

He says Tassoni “has a huge conflict when you’re sitting as a state senator but representing the labor organizations that I am negotiating with.” He says the Ethics Commission needs to be harder on this kind of thing.

A moment later, the governor, who seeks to wring \$50 million in savings from negotiating fringe benefits and the like, says he’d also like to do something about the way the state hires, fires, and rewards employees. “The poor performers discourage everybody else from doing well and, unfortunately, the union comes to their aid often.”

He says he wants to align benefits with “the real world.” This is quintessential Carcieri. As he put it on WPRO, “I’ve lived in the private sector. I’ve lived in the real world.”

He talks about the “real world” a lot. It’s as if the State House is another planet. But the fact is that this is the planet on which he has to operate and in his fifth year as governor he still has trouble figuring out how.

I have no real way to assess his proposing to save \$100 million by laying off 414 state employees, trimming temporary employment rolls by another 115, and lopping 487 empty jobs off the books.

Maybe it’s a terrific notion, but it’s hard to make an enlightened judgment until he fills in all the blanks about what jobs are involved.

It’s also hard to know what to make of his goal of \$50 million in contract savings — Downey says, “I don’t see how that could be done but we’re always willing, always willing, to sit and talk” — or \$50 million in program changes.

Sooner or later, the picture, including the impact on services, will be clearer.

In the meantime, the governor says that if you have better ideas of how the state can save, he’s open to hearing them.

Take him up on it.

Send him your proposals. Ask to meet with him and his staff. Keep the news media apprised of your efforts and of the response you get, or don’t get.

Write op-ed pieces. Send letters to the editor. Flood the airwaves and e-mail the Web sites.

If you support him, go right ahead and say that, too. What I don’t want to hear is anyone saying, “I hate what he’s doing but there’s nothing I can do about it.”

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

[mbakst@projo.com](mailto:mbakst@projo.com)