

M. Charles Bakst

Carcieri looks back at '07 and sees a lonely battle

01:00 AM EST on Sunday, December 16, 2007

At the end of a recent Chanukah ceremony, a rabbi gave Don Carcieri a book about a Jewish religious movement, titled *Despite All Odds*. The governor chuckled, because, as he told me later, “Well, I understand it!”

This is how the former business executive sees himself — single-handedly waging a battle that’s tough to win.

The Republican, who was narrowly reelected in 2006, is nearing the end of his fifth year in office. It was a tumultuous one marked by grim budget battles, layoffs, feuds with the Democratic General Assembly and organized labor, reports of outrageous private staffing practices, and bitter controversies about immigrants and welfare mothers. It was a year in which his values and compassion were continually questioned.

In an end-of-the-year interview in his State House office, Carcieri said he has nothing to apologize for. He asserts he’s just doing his job, challenging powerful interest groups and old assumptions, trying to get Rhode Islanders to view government in a new way, and to make it more affordable.

He thinks he and the state are making progress. You might be more apt to look at 2007 as the year the wheels fell off the Carcieri administration wagon. Not so, says the governor. “The wagon is going fine.”

This much is obvious: The budget battles ahead will be a test of wills and priorities still uglier than this year’s, and Carcieri’s values, style and skills will be tested as never before.

This is the way Carcieri, 65 today, describes his role:

“My job is to put together a budget that works, that’s balanced, and in my judgment balances out all of the different interests. What I see so far is I feel like I’m the only one looking out for Rhode Islanders....

“I feel like I’m the Lone Ranger often. What I see in this building is everybody coming in here to figure out how they can get a piece of the pie. And I’ve said, ‘Wait a minute. The pie is not growing as rapidly. We’ve got a big problem.’ And I’m trying to do the best I can for all of Rhode Island, and that means that there are going to be sacrifices.”

Carciari asserted that good things are happening in Rhode Island — for example, in the world of education, a heightened focus on standards, assessments and graduation requirements.

Still, he said, “There is huge built-in inertia — people that have enjoyed the system, the way it worked. I don’t mean just the public sector. The healthcare system is the same way. I mean you’ve got a system that’s been built with providers and insurers and so forth that are entrenched in the way it’s operating — but it isn’t operating efficiently or well, and so changing that is against long odds. That’s why I smiled [at the *Despite All Odds* title], because a lot of the things we’re taking on have been embedded for a long time.”

The governor said he still loves his job. He doesn’t ever think maybe he’s in the wrong line of work?

“Not at all,” he said. “I enjoy — you know me — I’m a people person. I’m a competitive person. I’m a problem solver.”

He said it’s unfortunate that people compartmentalize him. He said critics take the view, “If you don’t agree with me, there’s something wrong with you.” He insisted, “I don’t view it that way.”

He said disagreement on the merits is fine. “But when you get in this world” — he means the State House, where he works, but can’t quite acknowledge he is part of the fabric — “the partisan politics is unfortunate. Because as much as you try to get policy debates and discussions, too often I see it descending into, ‘Well, he’s a Republican, you know, we can’t go along with that ... We can’t ’ have him be successful.’

I told him I understood perfectly but that folks say the same thing about him, that he attacks adversaries — unions, say, or the legislature — because it suits his purposes. I said, “You whack away. Whack, whack, whack. And you’re good at it. You’re terrific at it.”

He responded, “From what I can see, I’m the one being whacked most of the time.”

He said he admires the job that labor leaders do for their members. But, “What they have been very successful at getting for their membership we can’t afford, and it’s way out of balance with what the vast majority of all the taxpayers out there have in terms of the compensation, benefits, work hours and so forth.

“So I understand that when I say we have to bring those into alignment — we’ve got to figure out how to make the state’s work force more efficient, which means find ways to consolidate — they’re not happy about that. I understand that, but that doesn’t mean I disrespect them or dislike them.”

Last month, Mike Downey, president of Council 94, the largest state employees union, said of the millionaire governor, “He strikes me as not wanting to be around workers.”

In our Dec. 7 interview, Carcieri declared, “Nothing could be farther from the truth. I like Mike.” Downey has been at meetings with him, but Carcieri said that, really, “He doesn’t know me.”

The governor continued, “When I look at my family, my extended family, it’s a good cross-section of what Rhode Island is. That’s the way I grew up. My dad, as you know, was a teacher, and Sue’s father died when he was 47 and her mother raised four children as a secretary. She struggled. We didn’t live high on the hog. That’s where I come from. It’s true, I’ve been successful in my business career, but I haven’t forgotten who I am or where I came from.”

Now he mentioned, as he often does, that years ago he relocated his family to Jamaica while he worked there for Catholic Relief Services. In a conversation with me last month, Kathleen Gorman, a hunger expert at the University of Rhode Island, said Carcieri talks of the poverty he saw in Jamaica but doesn’t see the poverty right around him in Rhode Island.

Carcieri says that’s not the case. He said it’s a failing that so much of welfare, RIte Care, and childcare is directed at families headed by single women. “That’s not the right policy for us,” he said. “We need to discourage that and find ways to discourage that and encourage marriage, encourage strong families ... Long before I got here, [the state] put in place all these systems and they don’t seem to have accomplished much.” So, he said, it’s reasonable to suggest that Rhode Island discuss ways to improve the situation.

Carcieri’s talk show comments about single women making “bad” decisions touched off a firestorm. But in speaking with me he did not backtrack. He said too many people spend too long on welfare and it is not creating the independence the program was intended to encourage. “Many states have gotten people into the workforce much faster and much more effectively,” he asserted. “So I think the program has not been effective, that’s all. And I think that’s a legitimate discussion.”

When I said Kate Brewster, of the Poverty Institute at Rhode Island College, was frustrated that his administration wasn’t interested in convening a task force to work on ways to improve the program, Carcieri said, “That hasn’t come to me. I’m more than happy to engage a group ... If she’s willing to come together with a group and discuss these things from a policy standpoint, sure, I’ll make sure our team at Health and Human Services participates in that.”

The governor said he would not apologize for comments he made about immigrants, interpreters, and benefits, remarks that touched off even more of a firestorm. On radio, he decried the state’s employing so many interpreters — it turned out, he says, to be fewer than he thought — when it seemed to him the immigrants ought to rely more on family members to help with translation.

In our interview, Carcieri said, “I’m just raising the policy question.”

Of course, it’s not just a policy question, it’s federal law.

I found it especially grating that he’d spoken of immigrants who want benefits “from us,” as if somehow they weren’t entitled to them or were less deserving.

Carcieri told me that “us” simply meant the state government, not people who’d been here for generations.

As Carcieri speaks during a leisurely hour-long, one-on-one conversation, he seems entirely calm and his arguments might impress you.

But I told him that he sows controversy when he goes on radio and appears to make policy statements in a hit-and-run fashion, demeaning people and undermining his own image. I asked, “Don’t you see what you’re doing to yourself?”

He chuckled and said, “I can see people that characterize it as that don’t like it. What I’m trying to do is flag up an issue: We’ve got enormous budget problems, the worst the state has seen in probably a decade and a half ... It’s going to precipitate some very difficult decisions.”

That’s when he compared himself to the Lone Ranger, protecting the taxpayers as a whole from people who come to the State House to get a piece of a pie that’s too small.

Of course, the pie might be larger if he and the Assembly did a better job with the economy.

The governor expressed the fear that legislators will backtrack on tax changes in recent years that critics say benefit the rich but which he prefers to characterize as encouraging decision-makers to do business here.

“We need to continue to position ourselves competitively from a tax standpoint with our neighbors,” he said.

I asked what makes him worry that the Assembly actually will raise taxes.

“I hear rumblings,” he said.

From whom?

“The walls.”

I don’t know where the walls get their information. For example, this past Wednesday, two top House Democrats, Majority Leader Gordon Fox and Finance Chairman Steve

Costantino, inveighed against any broad-based tax increase that would hurt job development.

Incidentally, Carcieri that day was on a surprise visit to the troops in Iraq.

Earlier, as he looked back on 2007, the governor said it was a thrill to see the Iway open, and he predicted that the highway relocation project will trigger dramatic redevelopment in Providence.

He also beamed that he and his wife, who have four children, now have 14 grandchildren, with the arrival on April 28 of daughter Sarah's baby, Susannah Marguerite Compton.

The governor spoke of the joy he gets from tossing a football with the grandkids, but, overall, he said he doesn't spend enough time on a personal life.

Why can't he find more time for Don Carcieri? "That's what my wife keeps asking me," he said.

He reflected, "I've always been that way. Whatever I'm doing, I put everything into it ... I get too serious about it, too immersed in it, because I'm conscientious about wanting to see us do well. Really, people say it sounds like political speak. It's not. I really love this place. I love the state. I just want to see it do well."

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