

Stop Right There

The case for term limits

by **Peggy Banaszek**

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ON MARCH 26, GOV. ED RENDELL WENT BEFORE THE PENNSYLVANIA PRESS CLUB AND SHOWED US what term limits can do to a politician. He candidly made the case for a number of reforms that are overdue and worthwhile. I haven't always agreed with Rendell's decisions, but I always admired his attitude and competence.

To the Press Club, he laid out an agenda that will, if enacted, complicate life for many current politicians, but will benefit the Pennsylvanians they serve. Among Rendell's proposed reform items were campaign contribution limits, new redistricting procedures, shrinking the size of the General Assembly and term limits. He made these proposals in the interest of improving the efficiency of government and the value to its taxpayers. After all, the General Assembly's annual budget of \$340 million is three times what the Commonwealth spends on Head Start and the library system — combined.

Rendell cannot run for governor again and perhaps may never again run for any political office. Term limits as mayor of Philadelphia and as governor have forced him to produce and move on within eight years each time. This is unlike members of the General Assembly, almost half of whom have more than eight years in office.

With time short and little to lose, Rendell is taking his chance to leave a legacy of reform, and he has asked the Legislature to follow his lead. Unfortunately, many in the Legislature, especially the Philadelphia delegation, have no interest in changing a system that is designed to their advantage.

State Rep. Mark Cohen, a 32-year incumbent, recently made an appearance on WHYY's Radio Times to argue against changing the process for redistricting. There is a bill in the Assembly which would change the redistricting process from its current status as a political football to a more mathematical and bipartisan approach, including the novel requirement that 15 percent of any district to reside within a circle. The current process creates districts designed to put all of an incumbent's supporters in a single district in order to influence the outcome of the incumbent's next race. The proposed process would prioritize keeping contiguous communities with similar needs in the same district.

Cohen defended the current process as fair to voters and politicians and, when prompted by host Marty Moss-Coane, went so far as to admit that the current redistricting process does — and should — work similar to tenure for professors. Specifically, Cohen declared that "I think that [legislators] who express unpopular ideas should be protected. ... I do not believe we should be making it easy to purge [legislators] because they express unpopular ideas."

The phone lines lit up after that statement. Apparently, the voters felt it is *their* decision whether a legislator should keep their job.



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Many in the Assembly are frightened for their jobs. As a result, they are embracing elements of the Speaker's Commission on Legislative Reform, which has proposed changes which remove some of the backdoor methods that legislators have used to add amendments and pass bills without discussion.

They may be taking steps in the right direction, but their motives are suspect. They are advocating for reform-minded changes now out of fear, not because the current system has led to record lows in voter participation, or because reform and progress are good.

Gov. Rendell has put all the legislators in a difficult position. He is challenging them to change from the current way they operate to a new way that provides them many fewer advantages. On the other hand, he also is doing them a favor. Reforms such as these should free legislators to be bold, just as term limits freed Rendell.

Let us see what term limits will do for our legislators. Without custom-made districts and unlimited fundraising, and hindered by a ticking clock, legislators can stop hiding behind trickery and campaign on their records. Or, perhaps that is what they are afraid will happen.

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