



Business divisions: Did Christie's speech stir up or shake up?

By Andrew George, December 14, 2015



Gov. Chris Christie did not hold back last week at an NJBIA event.

Gov. Chris Christie delivered a fiery speech at the New Jersey Business & Industry Association's Public Policy Forum last week, berating business leaders in attendance for “playing footsy” with state Democrats and unions, saying it was “time to get a spine.”

“Time to wake up, everybody,” the Republican presidential candidate said.

“That’s why I’m here today. It’s wake-up call time.”

The crowd was stunned.

Its reaction was mixed.

Some members were encouraged, others were outraged.

But this much is clear: There's never been a greater chasm between Christie and business leaders — a massive split in the relationship he may have cultivated and valued the most when he took office in January 2010.

NJBIA CEO and President Michele Siekerka wasn't offended. She said Christie's comments, particularly those pertaining to last month's legislative elections, were "spot-on."

"He gave us a rally cry and handed us a challenge," she said.

As for the tone of the speech, Siekerka said it wasn't anything the roomful of business leaders couldn't handle.

"We're adults in the room," she said. "The discussion was an honest-handed one. We all know our governor is very candid."

But it didn't sit well with everyone.

"I was really shocked," said one source within the business community who attended the forum. Like all who criticized the governor, the source asked for anonymity in fear of retribution. "I was like, what the heck? I didn't expect that."

Neither did anyone else in the room, said another attendee.

"I think that was the mood from everybody," the source said. "Not only were they sort of shocked — they were livid."

One source said that many people took particular exception with Christie's comments about the business community not offering enough support to Republican lawmakers. Busy on the presidential campaign trail, Christie was rarely seen in the state in the months and weeks leading up to last month's election, in which Democrats picked up four new Assembly seats.

"(He was) nowhere to be found and he didn't put any of his money into the election," said a source. "(And then) to be disingenuous like that and blame us in the business community?"

Christie's reprimand of the business community at large can be seen as especially ill-timed, given that some are becoming increasingly frustrated with his absenteeism.

"I don't begrudge him one bit for running for president," one source said. "That's his prerogative. But he can't simply ignore what's going on here or leave without truly putting someone else in charge. There are big decisions every day that need to be handled that aren't — and that's not fair to the business community."

Like Siekerka, John Boyd Jr., principal of the Princeton-based Boyd Co., said he took Christie's comments in a constructive way.

Boyd said that, if anything, he gives Christie "credit" for giving the tough speech and addressing many of the business community's concerns.

Christie's message, Boyd said, is "one that resonates beyond that room."

"I think sophisticated businesspeople appreciate that kind of talk," Boyd said. "It's very New Jersey for Christie to communicate like that to his constituency."

Another source agrees with Boyd, saying that for many, Christie's speech was a needed dose of reality.

"I don't think anybody should be slighted by that speech," the source said. "I wasn't."

Even if Christie hasn't been around lately to campaign for Republicans or support their efforts, it doesn't mean that he still can't urge the state's business leaders to step up their game, a source added.

"His absence doesn't take away from his part of the message," the source said.