The Right on the Left:
Which Democrat Will Have the Last Gubernatorial Laugh?

As Overview
Amidst the banquet of public power in Rhode Island, the term-limited governor stands mainly as a jester for activists to mock and insiders to lampoon. When their excess bagfuls of indignation, angry lips shout his name. When indignation begets offensive colors, the guilty gaseous point his way and giggle. And when, at last, the half-digested hopes of Rhode Islanders splutter upon the floor; he finds himself with mop in hand.
The General Assembly dominates state government, and it would be an understatement to say that the Democratic Party dominates it. Not excessive—remunerated for their responsibility, the body consists of part-time political dabbles who seek office out of some mixture of ego, self-dealing intentions, political ambition, and (of course) genuine desire to serve their communities.
Most of their constituents do not know who they are or what they do, with isolated exceptions related to narrow local issues, the occasional "legislative grant" (buying a smiling picture in the local paper for the price of a few grand in state taxpayer money), and the warm greeting on chilly community soccer league evenings.

Over all of this preside the House speaker, the Senate president, and the majority leaders in both chambers, who guide the festivities by means of procedure and largesse. Each representative and senator votes and proposes legislation, but the leaders may push them into the circular file of "further study" on a whim, controlling legislators by allowing or disallowing pet bills and by doling out the tiny aforementioned grants.

While constituents on the street remain largely oblivious, segments of them collect under the Democrat umbrella and maintain a close watch on the feeble of individual legislators. Government insiders, party insiders, and all of those who live and die by a political system that regular folks have trouble taking seriously have obvious reason to keep a keen eye on local players. Special interests—relentless in the kindly feelings of lawmakers—notably unions and social-service industry—have money and manpower to spread around the public square. Progressive ideologies are wholly comfortable working with both of the above, as long as they can inch the state toward an experiment in their utopia.

From the perspective of the right-wing reformer, therefore, the most valuable use of the governor's office would be to turn the jester's performance into a cutting commentary against the assorted nobles of Rhode Island government. With the legislature's edicts chained to one leg and its budget to the other, while judicial monolists bind his hands, the governor has no weapon but his voice.

What Happens Next
Neither of the remaining contenders for the Democrats' slot on the ballot is likely to do the rabbles' housing, and the intriguing, potentially differentiating question is to where the fingers will point when the scapegoat is no longer a Republican Other.

General Treasurer Frank Caprio has been a political insider his entire adult life, and his public persona is hardly characterized by an inclination to cause waves for special interests. The progressive contingent, however, has watched with suspicion as he's mingled with the enemy, represented by groups like the Ocean State Policy Research Institute, the Rhode Island Statewide Coalition, and Operation Clean Government.

He ranked number five on John Sininger's Spring 2009 list of the Top 10 Right-of-Center Rhode Islanders.

His broad appeal—manifesting in his current fundraising lead—make his chances good for general election victory. As governor, he may stand strong against tax increases, and he's certainly perceived as a friend to Rhode Island businesses, but these positive attributes may serve primarily to place him on the defensive, even as the General Assembly persists in its fiscally deadly habits.

The progressives will also strive to tangle him up in the tug-of-war over social issues, in which he's been reluctant to participate.

That's less of a problem for Attorney General Patrick Lynch, who is proficient in all of the soothing courtship calls of the Democrat-labor-Left coalition, which may provide an edge during primary season. Once in office, he'll likely avince comfort with progressives' agenda (where convenient) and work with his fellow Democrats to spread tissue paper over the state's cracking foundation. With those assumptions, we can expect Lynch to toss the governor's motley joker hat out of the room to the state's conservative minority (including the religious), national right-wingers, and "greedy" businessmen.

If former Cranston Mayor Stephen L-lefford was correct when he withdrew from the state and from speculative candidacy, that Rhode Islanders simply do not want to bring the feast to an end, then his opponent in the last Republican US Senate primaries will prove to have the perfect head for that three-balled cap. Lincoln Chafee is an "independent" still bearing the stains of his years as a nominal Republican. His pretensions toward fiscal conservatism will make a target of free-market and small-government principles, even as his actual liberalism clears the way for increasing burdens on taxpayers and businesses and facilitates a drunken lurch toward the libertines left in the dark hours of apocalyptic night.

In any case, conservatives might find some new liberty in lacking an ally in the hall of power, will be free to venture out and rebuild the kingdom from the frontiers in.