

New Jersey Governor Brendan Byrne: The Man Who Couldn't Be Bought**Donald Linky****Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press: 2014****449 pages****\$29.99****ISBN: 9781611477429****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v3i1.73>**

When Brendan Byrne was governor of New Jersey, the facetious query among employees in the state agency where I worked was, “will he show up at the state house today?” Amusing jibes about Byrne’s tennis addiction and his penchant for hobnobbing with celebrities in New York City were commonplace. Harsher words were expressed by foes of a state income tax that Byrne had early in his first administration deemed essential to the state’s economic health and a more equitable public education system. Hence the sardonic sobriquet, “One Term Byrne,” which in 1977 the governor rendered irrelevant by winning re-election decisively over state Senator Raymond Bateman.

Reviewing Brendan Byrne’s tumultuous governorship through the lens Donald Linky provides, one is reminded that contemporary and historical judgments do not necessarily mesh. Byrne emerges from these pages not as a dilettante in politics, nor merely a “good” governor, but as a courageous, visionary leader who made tough choices, took the hits that came with them, and persisted in finding ways to reach his objective.

What made Brendan Byrne tick? No great hardships seem to have shaped his character. Byrne grew up in reasonable comfort in West Orange, played the usual sports and participated in the usual family activities through the teen years. His life was deeply impacted by the Second World War, where, after a brief stint at Seton Hall College, he served as a navigator on B-17s, managing the stress of the Italian campaign bombing raids he participated in as well as anyone could. Post war, Byrne continued his education at Princeton University and Harvard Law

School. Byrne's lucky break (and it must be said, he earned his luck by persistent pursuit of the job) came with a clerkship for Joseph Weintraub, a leading Newark attorney who subsequently served with distinction as the state's Attorney General and later as Chief Justice of its Supreme Court.

What followed was almost out of a playbook for political advancement: appointment as an assistant Passaic County prosecutor, then assistant counsel and subsequently executive secretary to Governor Robert Meyner, where Byrne had a front row seat on how to navigate governance in Trenton. When Meyner left office in 1961 Byrne was appointed prosecutor in Essex County, where there was plenty of graft and illegal gambling (among other crimes) to prosecute. Governor Richard J. Hughes named Byrne head of the Public Utilities Commission, a part time appointment that enabled him to continue to practice law to support his growing family. Then came brief service as a Superior Court judge before his first race for governor in 1973.

Linky's approach to this enterprise, and most especially his account of the governor years (1974-1982), is that of "thick description," aided by numerous interviews with his subject (on which he heavily relied). Linky combed a wide range of other relevant sources, notably oral histories, public documents, and newspaper accounts in crafting a meaty narrative that occasionally gets lost in the weeds. That said, several themes emerge clearly, among them the following: As governor, Byrne was forthright, tough, honest, persistent, and—not least significant—successful in accomplishing most of his major goals. Assessing the state's fiscal situation in 1974 and concluding there was no alternative, he pressed for an income tax knowing it would be unpopular, though perhaps not appreciating just how much he would be hated for introducing it and sticking with the measure until it was enacted in 1976. (At one point the

governor and his wife, making a trip around the Meadowlands track, were strongly booed and practically assaulted by citizens protesting the tax.)

Linky devotes particular attention to the fight over the income tax, coupled with school financing reform. In addition, Byrne's bold leadership in preserving the Pinelands from wanton development; his leadership in bringing Casino gambling to Atlantic City and a Sports Complex to the Meadowlands in Northeast Jersey; his overhaul of the state's criminal laws, and role in engineering a state takeover of bus operations in North Jersey, all receive deserved attention. These major initiatives were complemented by a host of smaller successes, such as the creation of the public advocate position and partial funding of gubernatorial elections, in what looks in retrospect like a protean administration. So much for wondering if Governor Byrne was going to show up for work.

In his Introduction, Linky observed that a reader looking for a less than sympathetic account of Brendan Byrne needed to look elsewhere. That is true. His otherwise impressive research does not include interviews with Byrne's critics and political adversaries. Linky tends to elide Byrne's deficiencies, both personal and political. Nor is there meaningful comparison between Byrne's leadership style and that of others who served as the state's chief executive under the 1947 Constitution, which substantially increased the governor's clout.

That said, in making his case for Byrne as an admirable chief executive, Linky draws on compelling evidence that he was in fact that. Although this biography should not be the last word on Brendan Byrne's governorship, it is, above and beyond a valentine to the grand old man of New Jersey politics, a significant contribution to New Jersey political history.

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