

Goldmark: Port Authority shouldn't be a patronage pit



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Gov. Chris Christie of New Jersey has been on the griddle after it became known a senior staff member directed the Port Authority to engineer a traffic jam in Fort Lee, seemingly as an act of political retaliation. The traffic choked up roads for days in the small borough at the western end of the George Washington Bridge.

But an important aspect of this episode has been lost in the din of a political scandal: What does this say about how the Port Authority, which operates the bridge, is being run?

I was executive director of the Port Authority from 1977 to 1985, and what has happened to the agency over the past two decades is unfortunate. Rather than boasting unitary, professional management that is widely admired, the governors of the two states that created the Port Authority have installed political appointees who take their orders from a statehouse rather than from the authority's executive director. Political agendas and shopping lists are not what you want in an authority that is responsible for bridges and tunnels, PATH, port facilities and three major airports, among others.

I am told by former Port Authority staff that Christie has referred as many as 50 people to be hired at the agency. That kind of off-the-radar patronage was unheard of up until the late 1990s. Both Christie and New York Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo need to ensure the agency is not used for patronage. They need to ensure first-rate, nonpartisan, accountable management so the agency can be an engine of growth and investment -- not of political shenanigans.

But the Port Authority has a deeper problem: the creation of two lines of authority. In the bridge scandal, Christie's former deputy chief of staff spurred the lane closures by contacting a top executive at the Port Authority who had been nominated by Christie, highlighted in a trove of emails released last week.

Where is the chain of command? How is the Port Authority being run if someone can receive such an order and act on it without reporting to the agency's executive director? What does that say about how the authority is managed?

It's fair game for Christie, a popular governor who boasts about his honesty and willingness to buck "the system," to take the heat he's been receiving when his staff seems to have indulged in political dirty tricks. But this should also be a flashing red light for those who oversee the Port Authority: its board of commissioners and ultimately the two governors themselves.

It is inconceivable that the board was not aware that a direct line of authority from some Port Authority officials to Trenton had been created. It is common knowledge inside the Port Authority that there are two people for some functions that used to be performed by one person reporting up through a single chain of command to the executive director. And there is concern within the agency about the number and lack of qualifications of people being appointed to positions at the request of the New Jersey governor's office.

The Christie-Fort Lee affair provides the opportunity to clean out the Port Authority and re-establish it as one of the truly professional and accountable public-service organizations in the country.

Let's see whether anyone seizes the opportunity.

Peter Goldmark, a former budget director of New York State and former publisher of the International Herald Tribune, headed the climate program at the Environmental Defense Fund.