



OPINION

Port Authority rife with ugly politics



By [Nicole Gelinas](#)

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New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie. Photo: Jeff Zelevansky/Getty Images

The scandal isn't just that a top aide to New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie ordered up massive gridlock at the Fort Lee entrance to the George Washington Bridge in retaliation for the Fort Lee mayor's refusal to endorse Christie's re-election bid. It's that Port Authority officials went ahead with that political hit.

In a two-hour news conference Thursday, Christie said he was "humiliated" by the actions of his PA appointee, Bill Baroni, Baroni's subordinate and old Christie classmate David Wildstein and top gubernatorial aide Bridget Anne Kelly, all now quit or fired.

But this can't just be fixed by resignations and firings — and not just because the stunt caused life-threatening gridlock when ambulances couldn't get through. The biggest outrage is that the Port Authority is making any decisions based on raw short-term politics.

The PA was founded in 1921 as a model of progressive government — removed from cutthroat politics.

Yes, deciding what to build will always be the job of elected officials — but actually building it and running it is a job for technocrats, not pols or their henchfolk.

The two governors created the authority to solve a problem: New York and New Jersey needed to work together on building bridges and tunnels to connect the two states, as well as the ports on both sides of the Hudson. But they kept bickering over who should build what, and where.

So the governors would each appoint board members to the new authority, and the board would pick an executive to run it. The board members would come from both states, yet act not on behalf of either state, but for both.

Over the next two decades, the PA would build critical crossings, including the George Washington Bridge and the Lincoln Tunnel.

But the authority turned rancid a long time ago.

Governors started using the PA for unacceptable political ends way back in the '60s — when Gov. Nelson Rockefeller got it to divert financial resources to building the World Trade Center. (His brother had just built an office tower downtown, and needed company for it.)

But it's grown worse in the decades since. In the 1980s, Gov. Mario Cuomo used World Trade Center revenues to fund patronage projects that had nothing to do with ports, bridges (or airports), including real-estate ventures in Queens. Meanwhile, Jersey got a similarly political development in Hoboken.

After 9/11, Gov. George Pataki saddled the Port Authority with impossible financial obligations — \$7 billion in debt — to build One World Trade. Jersey got the obscenely overpriced Calatrava PATH station there.

The billions that the Port Authority has spent downtown mean that it doesn't have the money it needs to do what it's supposed to be doing: keeping up bridges and tunnels and modernizing LaGuardia, Kennedy and Newark airports.

More recently, the PA took over the Atlantic City Airport. Pumping money into Atlantic City to prop up failing casinos has nothing to do with the authority's mission, but Christie wanted it. (His point man on the takeover: Baroni.)

The political interference wastes all kinds of cash. For example, the Port Authority was supposed to hand over security responsibility for the new World Trade Center to the NYPD as a cost-saving measure. But Christie nixed that five-year-old agreement, vowing last year when he accepted the Port Authority Police union's endorsement that "never . . . will there be another police force who will patrol the new World Trade Center."

As for the board: Christie named a former chief of staff and a drug-industry lobbyist. Gov. Andrew Cuomo named a publisher of Spanish-language newspapers.

None of this was a news-dominating scandal. But it all adds up — and contributes to New York and New Jersey's inability to compete with the rest of the world on better infrastructure.

Even without the political gridlock imposed on Fort Lee, the way that successive governors have routinely treated the Port Authority was already a scandal — and has seriously harmed both states' ability to be competitive.

All along, Port Authority appointees have never spoken up about how political mandates have constrained their ability to serve the public good. (The MTA has the same problem, albeit to a lesser degree.)

If Bridgegate proves anything, it's that we need more checks and balances, not less.

Consider: The PA did provide some checks and balances — if Christie alone had run the GW Bridge, we'd still probably be in the dark (and in traffic). But that doesn't change the fact that the agency regularly acts at the behest of sleazy political operatives.

New York and New Jersey voters deserve better. That means: no more patronage appointments. No more patronage projects.

And when either governor asks the Port Authority to do something rancid, it should just say "no."

Nicole Gelinas is a contributing editor of the Manhattan Institute's City Journal.

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