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Tom Robbins, formerly of the Village Voice , had an interesting prediction for Gotham Gazette in 2010: "Andrew Cuomo launches his campaign for governor and tells Post state editor Fred Dicker that he's going to be nothing like Spitzer. â€ You and Eliot really got off on the wrong foot, Fred, and I'm not going to let that happen with us,' he vows. â€ No governor in his right mind wants both you and your boss Rupert as enemies. I learned that from my father.' In the following weeks, Dicker runs off a string of exclusive stories based on insider tips from the AG's office and Cuomo campaign."

That exact series of events probably did not take place in real life, but Gov. Andrew Cuomo apparently has won himself the unwavering support of the New York Post's Albany editor, Fred Dicker , and the Post's editorial page. The cozy relationship between Cuomo and Dicker, with Dicker getting loads of information from the close-lipped Cuomo administration but attributing barely any quotes to Cuomo, leaves other Capitol reporters feeling a bit burned and skeptical about the openness of the Cuomo administration.

Virtually all politicians want to control the media and get their message out, but Cuomo seems to have taken this to a higher level, refusing on the record communication with some of the state's leading news outlets, favoring a single sympathetic reporter and using advertising to press his case.

The Governor's Outlet

So far, Dicker seems a major beneficiary of Cuomo's approach. Dicker, a 30-year veteran is known as a dogged, opinionated Capitol reporter. Along with his column for The Post he also has an A.M. radio talk show that is must-listen radio for Albany insiders.

"All you have to do is read the New York Post to see how often Freddie and Andrew talk, though the attorney general has, over the last couple of years, rarely been directly quoted," said Wayne Barrett in a blog post titled "Andrew Cuomo Hanging Out With BFF Fred Dicker Not Good News for Other State Democrats " dated July 29, 2010, documenting the perceived close relationship between Dicker and Cuomo.

"Since Cuomo announced his candidacy, the governor-to-be, who still won't appear on NY1, has gabbed four times on Dicker's Talk 1300. In fact, he's so comfortable on the show that he sounds like he thinks he's still whispering off the record to his trusted confidante," Barrett continued.

NY1 keeps a " Cuomo Clock " that tallies the number of days Cuomo has not appeared to do an on-air interview with the network. The clock sits somewhere around 1,524 days as of writing.

Barrett wasn't the only one concerned with Cuomo's connection to Dicker last year. Remember Carl Paladino? Paladino and Dicker got into a heated exchange during a meeting of the business council last year. The men exchanged words about assertions Paladino had made about Cuomo's love life and about investigations Dicker was supposedly doing into Paladino's daughter. After Paladino threatened to take Dicker out, his press secretary Michael Caputo accused Dicker of "working for Cuomo." Paladino called Dicker a "stalking horse," for the Cuomo campaign.

Rex Smith, editor of the Albany Times Union , a paper that Dicker derides on his radio show, says that Dicker's coverage has "driven entire episodes at the Capitol."

One good example might be the "Trooper Gate" scandal. The Albany Times Union had reported on Bruno's use of state vehicles -- apparently thanks to a tip from the Spitzer administration. Dicker's relationship with Gov. Eliot Spitzer was extremely contentious, so Dicker quickly took the side of Republican Majority Leader Joe Bruno.

"Fred's coverage is extremely lopsided and favors whatever the Cuomo administration is fanning for. It seems to me it has been that way for years. I think the Cuomo administration uses Fred as a wall post so people can see what they are planning," said Smith.

Smith said that Dicker's "standards for sourcing" allows people to say things they wouldn't if their names were attached it. This means the Cuomo administration and its friends can drop stories in Dicker's lap with impunity and still deny they have a close relationship with Dicker.

"To Fred's credit," said Smith, "he gets strong tips from people -- legitimate tips."

Dicker did not return requests for comment.

From the Editorial Page

The Post does not seem to mind shifting its positions to accommodate Cuomo. In the dispute over changing the last in first out rule for teacher layoffs, for example, the Post jumped suddenly from supporting Mayor Michael Bloomberg' support for ending seniority based layoffs to backing Cuomo's position.

Of course, the Post editorials could reflect sincere belief or an eagerness to support the governor after four years of turmoil in the state's executive branch.

"The governor is a popular guy," said a source who was the subject of a Post editorial that

appeared just as Cuomo's irritation with this individual reached its peek.

"I think there is a sense of 'Let's give the guy a chance,'" the source continued. "This governor is particularly skilled at certain things. But I think his manipulations have cost him with the press."

The source cited early revelations about Cuomo's ties to the Committee to Save New York and its reluctance to register as a lobbyist as an example.

Cuomo has made his relationship with the press and the media in general a cornerstone of his governorship. Even before he officially announced his candidacy for governor, Cuomo worked hard to tightly control his message -- and then get that message out. In that he seems almost the opposite of his predecessor David Paterson, who seemed to delight in on off-the-cuff conversations with reporters and on talk radio.

Cuomo announced early on that if labor challenged his position on budget cuts, he would a counter with his own ad campaign. Through the Committee to Save New York he has done just that. Meanwhile people who disagree with Cuomo publicly can expect a quick -- and harsh -- response.

All this -- and the Post's role -- came together in a dispute that involved the Committee to Save New York. It became known earlier this year that the group was not registered as a lobbying organization.

From the start, the Post rushed to the defense of the Cuomo administration and the Committee to Save New York. When Blair Horner of the New York Public Interest Research Group brought up the fact that the committee was not registered as a lobbying group even though it was technically functioning as such, the Post reacted with an editorial titled "Cynical Moralists," slamming Horner.

"So the committee's enemies -- backed by an ostensible voice of reform, the New York Public Interest Research Group, and other so-called good-government groups--are muttering about a supposed unholy secret alliance between the new governor and the business community," the editorial read.

The Post wasn't terribly concerned that the Committee to Save New York was not registered as a lobbyist and attacked Horner for pointing it out. But it took a very different stand when Billy Easton of the Alliance for Quality Education protested Cuomo's budget cuts. The Post's editorial " Pigs in Saints' Clothing " pointed out that Easton is not registered as a lobbyist.

"Walk just about any capitol corridor in Albany, and odds are you'll trip over lobbyist-without-portfolio Billy Easton, of the fraudulently mislabeled Alliance for Quality Education," said the Post. "We say without portfolio because, while rare is the legislator whom Billy hasn't buttonholed lately, he has yet to register as a lobbyist this year."

Budget Brickbats

When chief Judge Jonathan Lippman submitted a budget that did not contain the level of cuts Cuomo had asked for, the Post again jumped to the governor's aid .

"Lippman essentially stuck his thumb in Gov. Cuomo's eye -- budgetarily speaking," the editorial said. "The new governor asked for restraint, and the jurist said, 'Maybe for thee but certainly not for me.'"

As the budget season has worn on, the Cuomo administration has begun to join in with the Post; Cuomo's press secretary, Josh Vlasto, has been blasting targets for the slightest annoyance.

Horner earned Vlasto's scorn for opposing legislation Cuomo proposed that would put caps on awards for medical malpractice suits. (Horner worked for Cuomo when Cuomo was attorney general.) Vlasto " called Horner a "mouthpiece for trial lawyers."

Horner shot back e-mailing The Observer's Azi Payabarh saying , "Pretty funny the best insult a

career mouthpiece can come up with is to call someone a mouthpiece. It's not about personal insults, it's about the cruel impact that could result from the deal cut by the governor."

Vlasto denied that the Cuomo administration has any sort of special relationship with Dicker but did not provide any statement.

Horner said that a lot of people want to see Cuomo succeed -- himself and NYPIRG included. "We are the groups cheer leading the governor on a lot of issues like independent redistricting and ethics reform," he said.

However, Horner added, "I think personal attacks are beneath the office of the governor. I thought that last year when we had a governor attack us in the state of the state and I think it this year. The governor's office has always cracked down hard on criticism -- this isn't kick the bean bag. Unfortunately, it is their job to undermine the policy difference but if you want good public policy you need to talk to both sides."

Assemblymember Richard Gottfried , who sat on Cuomo's Medicaid redesign team, got his taste of the administration's tactics when he said he didn't agree with the group's quick approval of Cuomo's plans and didn't think the recommendations would actually save the state as much money as the committee claimed it would.

Vlasto went back to work. He told the New York Times that Gottfried is a "protector of Albany status quo and special interests."

Gottfried and Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver released a statement the next day expressing their support for the design team's work.

"There is a difference between contentious policy disagreements and getting personal. I think we are starting to see that he is a bit thin skinned," said the source.

Getting Personal

Shawn Barry, of Voices of Community Activists and Leaders , a group that is protesting Cuomo's budget cuts said he thinks the vitriol does not help the debate. "It does seem there is a level of intimidation, a level of being vindictive. I think that came out of the campaign when anyone who issued the faintest criticism of his campaign got phone calls from the governor's aides. The sort of ad hominem attacks on the Dick Gottfried and Blair Horner -- there is a way to disagree with them to debate the substance of the critique without directly attacking the person especially people who have such long respected careers as those guys."

So what does all of this mean? Cuomo, who enjoys a 70 percent approval rating, seems quick to scuttle any dissent. For now, he only need rattle his saber to frighten off legislators, who currently have zero political capital, and he has successfully countered the arguments of opposition advocates with editorials in the Post and tongue lashings from Vlasto.

Some question, though, whether this can last. They think Cuomo is growing thin skinned and that his "my way or the highway" approach is actually fanning the fires of opposition. Sixteen protesters were arrested at the Capitol late last month, and groups that oppose cuts to education, school aid and services for the poor are stepping up their campaigns and pushing for the governor to keep a tax on the richest New Yorkers, something Cuomo has vowed he will not do.

Barry said the cheerleading for Cuomo in the press has made it difficult to get any dissenting message out. Cuomo hasn't even commented on the protests in the Capitol that led to the arrest of 16 activists.

Barry notes that polling shows that while Cuomo is popular his budget cuts are not. "When people are asked about the substance of the governor's agenda he no longer has majority support," Barry said. "His personal popularity continues to be high but there is this echo chamber ... a feedback loop. Some parts of media just feeds on itself. People hear the governor is popular and doing great things and that reinforces his popularity."

He believes this has made it nearly impossible for ideas other than the governor's to make it into the main-stream media.

"We are not getting any substantive evaluation of who benefits from Cuomo's agendas," Barry

said. "The media drives the agenda. Some journalists go from mere reporting to pushing political agenda and political ideology. I don't think that contributes to a healthy debate for New York State. You see it with Fred Dicker and Bill Hammond who do a mixture of opinion and reporting."

Barry isn't the only one who thinks as the Wall Street Journal wrote : "As the budget deadline draws closer, and policy hot spots have inflamed, the Cuomo administration is feeling a not-so-gentle tug back to earth."

"The governor loves to appear on Dicker's show and his inner circle loves to source Dicker. If there is news you first read about it from Fred Dicker. The governor knows knows how to spin media and manipulate public image of the administration, he may be more particularly skilled at doing it but it does not mean all the public on board or he is infallible," said Barry. "He may seem like he is Teflon on the surface but it seems like the criticism is sticking."