

THE NEWS & OBSERVER

Is this the return of moderate Mayor Pat?

By Rob Christensen
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Has Mayor Pat finally arrived in Raleigh?

You know, the guy who was the popular mayor of Charlotte, a Democratic-leaning city, for a record 14 years.

One was wondering whether that McCrory – the pragmatic moderate conservative – has been stuck in a monster traffic jam on Interstate 85 for the past two years unable to make it to the capital.

The McCrory who did show up in Raleigh bore only the slightest resemblance to Mayor Pat who won a landslide election identifying himself as an “Eisenhower Republican” with a long history of working closely with Democrats.

Swept up in the “conservative revolution” in the legislature, McCrory moved quickly to his right. How much he went starboard of his volition and how much he was pushed in that direction by a tea party-influenced legislature is a matter of debate.

Conservative bona fides

National columnist/analyst Nate Silver last year rated McCrory the ninth most conservative governor in the country, placing him to the right of Sam Brownback of Kansas, Rick Perry of Texas and Bobby Jindal of Louisiana.

This fall, McCrory was one of four governors given an “A” grade by the Cato Institute, a Washington-based libertarian think tank founded by industrialist Charles Koch. The other three governors were Brownback, Paul LePage of Maine and Mike Pence of Indiana – all hard-shell conservatives.

For the first half of his term, McCrory tended to talk moderate, but govern from the right.

Now there are signs he is moving toward the middle as he begins to organize his 2016 re-election effort.

Last week, his administration announced new regulations for abortion clinics which they said should not force any of North Carolina’s clinics to close.

The new regulations were required by a law passed by the legislature last year at the urging of abortion opponents, who said updated safeguards were needed to protect women's health. But abortion rights advocates said it was a thinly veiled effort to close down the clinics.

McCrory signed the bill even though he had promised during the campaign not to support any new abortion restrictions. But the key was what the new regulations looked like.

On another hot button social issue, McCrory had little to say when the courts struck down North Carolina's ban on same-sex marriages.

At the same time, he has at least been talking about the possibility of extending Medicaid, the federally funded health insurance program for the poor.

Renewing jobs focus

It all seems part of McCrory returning to his traditional focus on jobs, rather than more divisive social issues.

There were other signs last week as well.

On Wednesday, he moved one of the more provocative figures in his administration, Secretary John Skvarla, from the top environmentalist post to Commerce secretary. Whether fairly or not, Skvarla was seen as the point man in the administration's pro-industry tilt. At Commerce, Skvarla can be as pro-industry as he wants.

Then on Thursday, McCrory released the draft of the 10-year State Transportation Improvement Program. Nothing says "Eisenhower Republican" more than highway-building. The TIP includes a light-rail line connecting UNC Hospital in Chapel Hill to Durham, championing an issue for which he was known in Charlotte.

To the extent that McCrory can shift the conversation toward jobs, roads and education, he will be traveling the successful path of both past Democratic and Republican governors in North Carolina.

But the question is whether the Republican legislature – having learned from the midterm elections that they can engineer a conservative revolution with little negative political fallout – will allow McCrory to move more toward the center.