

## Modern Dems Could Learn From Lucey

By MARC EISEN

Will Mary Burke be the Democrats' next Pat Lucey?

Understandably, the eulogies surrounding the former governor's death at age 96 have focused on his remarkable 1970-'77 tenure as chief executive, when he modernized Wisconsin government. But Lucey was also a party-builder who, in the 1950s as a Democratic field organizer and later as party chair, helped relaunch a party that for 50 years had eaten the dust of the Republicans and Bob La Follette's Progressive Party.

Lucey was a Jesuit-educated philosophy major who later made his fortune in real estate, and he seemed to take political lessons from both. He mixed high-minded reform with Machiavellian political skills. He was our first modern-age governor.

Lucey merged the two university systems, retooled state aid programs to benefit poorer communities and poorer school districts, deinstitutionalized mental health treatment, enacted consumer-protection and campaign-finance reforms laws and still won the hearts (and wallets) of the business community, despite his encompassing liberal vision.

It was Lucey, stealing a page from the GOP playbook, who exempted manufacturers from the machinery and equipment tax as an incentive to re-invest in their plants and then removed business inventories from the property tax. All this was hugely beneficial to Wisconsin's economic wheelhouse in manufacturing.

In 1977, the *Wall Street Journal* surveyed Wisconsin's economic success and proclaimed the state "the shining star of the Snowbelt." Those days are long past.

**For most of the next 35-plus years Wisconsin's economy has struggled under** Democratic and Republican governors alike. The ferocious 1981-'82 recession laid waste to manufacturing in southeastern Wisconsin and triggered a fundamental economic decline that bedevils the state to this day. For sure, there was a brief boom in the 1990s. But the new century has been a bust. It's May 2014, and Wisconsin still has fewer jobs than it did in

December 2007, just before another ugly recession rattled the state's economic foundation.

For Democrats, Wisconsin's fiercely contested but decisive swing to Republican domination suggests that the powerless liberals need another Pat Lucey. That is, a nextgen leader who understands the imperative of building a vibrant 21st century economy in a state mired in an Old World Wisconsin re-enactment of yesteryear's political wars. Where is the Democratic leader who recognizes that unions, as vital as they once were, are all but a spent force? Traditional labor is crippled by hostile economic trends, while public unions are reeling as much from their own cupidity and stupidity as from the conservative pummeling.

I wrote this 18 months ago in a [column](#) for my old paper, *Isthmus*, arguing that Democrats needed a pro-growth leader like Lucey. That piece was bolstered by lengthy interviews I did with the ex-governor in 1981 for a series of stories on his legacy. (This came after Lucey's quixotic run for vice president in 1980 on an independent presidential ticket with liberal Republican John Anderson.) Some of the things he said then seem eerily contemporary.

Lucey criticized the Wisconsin Education Association Council, the big teachers union, for fighting his efforts to institute periodic student testing in the 1970s to better gauge educational quality. He argued that public employees were relatively privileged in the hard times of the 1981 recession. "Democrats who seek office cannot simply be champions of public employees and expect to be elected," he said. "In fact, I'm surprised there hasn't been a serious conflict within the labor movement between private and public employees."

That chasm more or less broke open 30 years later under Gov. Scott Walker's prodding. Democrats and their public union backers lost the legislative battle against Act 10 and then lost again when they made their outrage at Walker's public-union-busting the centerpiece of the recall election. How the party recalibrates and moves on is not yet clear.

Businesswoman Mary Burke, the Democrats' presumed gubernatorial candidate, has the outsider credentials that seemingly position her to carve out a new path, but she seems content so far to stick to the Democrats' tired playbook. A series of her fundraising letters that landed in my family's mailbox, for example, relentlessly hammered Walker

as if the 2014 election is another recall election. Tellingly, they fail to describe at any length what Burke would do as governor.

Not being Scott Walker won't be enough.

**Times change and so do issues and political dynamics. But to win, Mary Burke, like Pat Lucey, needs to lead a revamped Democratic Party.** She needs to recognize, for example, that if public unions have a future, they need to operate more like professional groups and less like industrial unions populating a regimented 1950s factory floor. Most of all she needs to espouse an economic strategy grounded in the reality of the 21st century, as opposed to the nostalgia for the mid-20th century that seems to grip both parties in Wisconsin.

For that matter, Burke's economic strategy, [\*Invest For Success\*](#), shows promise, as business columnist John Torinus [noted](#) recently. But those policies don't seem to be central to what has thus far been an ill-defined and uninspired challenge of the incumbent.

Jim Wood, who was a key Lucey aide, told me a few years ago: "Pat knew you only walked through this valley once. Politics wasn't about getting elected. It was getting elected to do something."

Mary Burke doesn't seem to have figured that out yet. Scott Walker surely has, which is one reason why he keeps winning.

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