

The Blurred Line:
Party Politics and Government in
Westchester County:
Report and Recommendations

State of New York
Commission on Government Integrity
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June 1990

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I.

INTRODUCTION

The Commission on Government Integrity has completed an eighteen month investigation in Westchester County culminating in public hearings on November 28 and 29, 1989. The Westchester investigation began as part of two broader Commission inquiries into government procurement practices and the financial disclosure practices of political party committees throughout the State. As a result of allegations made and information provided to the Commission, the investigation evolved to focus on political party influence on contracting, budgetary and personnel matters, with particular emphasis on the administration of Playland Amusement Park.

The Commission's investigation revealed a case study of the relationship between party politics and government in a county dominated by a powerful local political party and its leader. The investigation disclosed that the local Republican Party and its leader, Anthony Colavita, wield considerable power and influence in county personnel and budgetary matters and that Colavita is perceived by people both in and out of government as able to influence the processes of Westchester County government. The inves-

tigation revealed that Colavita has worked himself into the processes of both the legislative and executive branches of the county government to an extent that makes him a de facto official of that government.

Commission inquiries over the past two and a half years have revealed that local governments throughout the State are often dominated by party leaders who are not elected by or accountable to the voters. In Westchester County, the Commission found a graphic illustration of this reality. In making recommendations, the Commission takes into account the inherent symbiotic relationship between leaders of government and the political parties from which they emerge, but at the same time seeks to eliminate practices which needlessly foster the perception that access to government may be obtained by making contributions to particular parties. In short, the reforms sought are aimed at drawing clearer lines of distinction between the political and governmental structures where appropriate and possible, and, to the extent that divisions are not feasible, making party leaders more accountable under the law for the influence they exercise.

In response to revelations made at the Commission's public hearings in November, 1989, County Executive Andrew O'Rourke has indicated that he will propose several