

Politics and Poetry Are Volatile Mix in New Jersey

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If poetry is the art of finding the transcendent in everyday experience, then Amiri Baraka, New Jersey's poet laureate, has given the state more than it ever bargained for.

Nearly a year ago, Mr. Baraka set off a furor by reading a poem suggesting that Israelis had been warned about the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Now, as the New Jersey Legislature works to cobble together the matter of a \$24 billion budget, lawmakers are also trying to delicately maneuver through another political thicket: what to do about the state's embattled poet laureate.

When Mr. Baraka recited his poem "Somebody Blew Up America" last September, the reaction was swift and angry. Outraged Jewish leaders demanded his resignation. First Amendment advocates defended Mr. Baraka's statements on the basis of artistic freedom. Black activists sprang to his defense, saying that he was being stifled because of his long history as a radical and a black nationalist.

Gov. James E. McGreevey and the state legislators have been trying to find a way to defuse the controversy by eliminating the position of state poet laureate. But because the conflict involves two outspoken constituency groups -- blacks and Jews -- Democratic strategists have been going through political contortions to avoid re-inflaming the passions stirred up last year.

Although the governor has not hesitated to publicly denounce Mr. Baraka in recent days, some aides have been urging the administration to keep a low profile on the issue, lest it appears to be pandering to Jewish groups. In the General Assembly, meanwhile, where several black members are offended by the attempt to oust Mr. Baraka, Democratic leaders on Monday blocked a Republican attempt to put the bill up for a vote, even though it had 56 co-sponsors -- and only 41 votes are needed for it to pass.

Assemblywoman Rose Marie Heck, a Republican from Bergen County, said she was baffled by the Democrats' sudden lack of interest in the bill. "It would appear to me that the Democratic leadership thinks that the minority caucus is much more powerful than the Jewish constituency," she said.

But Joseph Donnelly, a spokesman for Assembly Democrats, said the bill would most likely be put up for a vote on Monday -- the final session before summer recess.

"The truth of the matter is we just haven't gotten to it," he said.

Few would have expected such a clamor when New Jersey, the state where Allen Ginsberg was born and Walt Whitman is buried, created the position of poet laureate in 1998.

In 2002 Mr. Baraka, who has been published as a playwright and poet under the name LeRoi Jones, was selected by the state arts council to hold the office. Mr. Baraka has told reporters that before accepting the position, he warned Governor McGreevey that he might cause political uproar. The governor, Mr. Baraka said, told him not to worry.

A few weeks after officially accepting the post, Mr. Baraka proved his warning correct, when he appeared at a poetry festival and read a poem that included the lines:

"Who know why Five Israelis was filming the explosion And cracking they sides at the notion? Who knew the World Trade Center was gonna get bombed? Who told 4,000 Israeli workers at the Twin Towers To stay home that day. Why did Sharon stay away?"

Mr. McGreevey called for the poet laureate's resignation, but Mr. Baraka refused. The governor then tried to fire him but found out that New Jersey law did not give anyone the power to fire the poet laureate. The governor responded with the political equivalent of a siege: freezing Mr. Baraka's \$10,000 stipend and urging legislators to abolish the post.

In public, many elected officials embraced the idea and pounced on the opportunity to denounce Mr. Baraka's statements. By the time the Senate voted on the measure in January, some of that vehemence had melted away: the measure received the bare minimum number of votes needed to succeed -- 21. The 19 other senators had abstained.

Now that the General Assembly has balked at voting on the measure, Charles "Shai" Goldstein, director of the New Jersey Anti-Defamation League, has been working the State House hallway, trying to muster enough support to force the bill to a floor vote.

Among Assembly Democrats, however, there is limited, but strong, opposition to the bill.

Assemblyman William D. Payne, who grew up with Mr. Baraka in Newark, said talk of race, religion and ethnicity had distorted the real issue. "This is a matter of literature," said Mr. Payne, a member of the black caucus. "I mean, are we going to go back to the days where we're taking books back out of libraries and burning them? Is this Germany in 1936?"

But other Democratic lawmakers said the dispute had left black legislators in a political bind. Mr. Baraka is such a sympathetic figure in black neighborhoods that the Newark school board named him the district's poet laureate.

"It puts African-American legislators in an uncomfortable position where they'd have to discharge the poet from their own backyard," said Assemblyman Reed Gusciora, from Mercer, who is white.

Mr. McGreevey said that while he did not believe government should be in the position of judging art or restricting artists, Mr. Baraka had misused the imprimatur of the state to lend legitimacy to statements that were unfounded and anti-Semitic.

Mr. Baraka, who was recently invited to speak at Mishkenot Sha'ananim University in Jerusalem this October, seems dismayed by his treatment in New Jersey.

Even if the poet laureate position is eliminated, he has vowed to fight on until he is paid his stipend. "I've been a writer for 50 years," Mr. Baraka, 68, said Monday at his home in Newark. "And this is so bizarre."

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