



February 13, 2011

New York seems to draw political scandal

Jill Terreri
Staff writer

Voters across New York are wondering: Is there something in the water?

The Empire State has been home to some of the most embarrassing, head-scratching scandals, from the prostitute-patronizing governor to the tickling Southern Tier congressman to the latest example, the shirtless member of the House who used his own name and e-mail address to communicate with a woman he met online.

The downfall of Chris Lee, the mild-mannered, clean cut, independently wealthy businessman with the beautiful wife and child, has led to many questions, chief among them: How could he have been so dumb?

"There's an element of arrogance in a lot of these guys," said Elayne Rapping, professor emeritus of American studies at the State University at Buffalo.

New York's litany of recent scandals is nothing if not diverse. The newsmakers have been people from both ends of the political spectrum and both sides of the state.

Their objectionable activities include abuse of their office, in the cases of Rep. Charles Rangel and former state Comptroller Alan Hevesi, and personal indiscretions, in the case of Carl Paladino, who had forwarded racy e-mails before he ran for governor.

Lee's electronic missives to a woman who was not his wife, including a photo of himself posing in front of a mirror without his shirt, were unwise and maybe bizarre, but not illegal.

Lee, a Republican, quickly resigned Wednesday after the photo and e-mails were published by the gossip site Gawker.com.

New York's many falls from grace appear to share only one similarity: that politics attracts a certain individual who believes he — most of the offenders have been men — can get away with something.

"It really is a phenomenon," conservative radio talk show host Bill Nojay said of New York's parade of disgraced politicians. "People make jokes about maybe there's something dumped in Love Canal. ... Aside from the yuk-yuk factor, there's no common thread."

Monroe County Democratic Chairman Joseph Morelle said politics tends to attract crazy people more than other fields, because politicians are generally acknowledged wherever they go, they're on television a lot and they have a staff that caters to them.

"If you have an ego issue, this is a kind of business that seems glamorous to you," he said.

It appears that Hevesi, who used his state resources to transport his wife and later pleaded guilty to a charge in connection with accepting kickbacks, and Rangel, who wrote tax law but was found to have not paid all of his taxes, didn't think the rules applied to them.

Then there was former state Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno, who is appealing his conviction

on two felony counts of mail fraud.

And those are just some of the more obvious recent examples. Toss in former Gov. David Paterson, who paid a steep fine for accepting tickets to the 2009 World Series, or any of several state lawmakers, some convicted of crimes and some who just made poor choices.

"Men who are in a position of power tend to think they can get away with anything, and they are shocked when they get caught," Rapping said.

What's debatable is whether there is actually more bad behavior or if the current media environment just puts everyone under a microscope.

"Lots of presidents have had mistresses and things, but it was considered something that you didn't talk about, it was under the rug," said Rapping, remembering that President John F. Kennedy's womanizing was well-known among an elite circle and the media largely looked the other way.

The Lee story exploded Wednesday once it was posted by Gawker at 2:33 p.m. The news moved fast on the Internet, including Twitter, and Lee submitted his resignation effective at 5 p.m. A statement announcing his departure was released at 6 p.m.

Lee exchanged the e-mails with a woman, identified by the *Washington Post* as Yesha Callahan, a 34-year-old single mother who works at the University of Maryland, who had posted an advertisement in the "Women seeking men" section of Craigslist.

Lee was well aware of the possibility for harm on the Internet, penning an opinion piece in 2009 for the *Tonawanda News* in which he addressed student Internet safety.

"Responding to what may seem like a friendly e-mail or an appealing marketing offer can have serious consequences," he wrote.

"Private information and images can so easily be transmitted to friends and strangers alike."

This awareness, that in the age of Google anyone with an online presence can be found, makes Lee's actions all the more confounding.

"I'm just so disappointed that someone could put (himself) in that position," said Greece resident Bill Selke, 79. "It's just hard to fathom at the moment."

For constituents of the 26th District like Selke, life will go on without a representative until Gov. Andrew Cuomo calls a special election, which will be scheduled at his discretion.

"When you lose a voice, you lose input," said Selke, who worked on Lee's veteran advisory board. "I had the utmost feeling that he was doing a great job and working very hard for his constituents. He is what I consider a very serious dedicated congressman."

Because so many scandals have happened among Republican and Democratic ranks, this latest episode isn't expected to hurt the Republicans any more than Rep. Eric Massa's resignation amid allegations that he harassed his staff, and subsequent televised admission that he tickled a staff member, hurt his fellow Democrats.

Lee was recruited to run for the 26th District after Rep. Thomas Reynolds decided to retire.

Republicans were excited about Lee because he was an attractive candidate with an attractive family who held conservative values. He also had experience in manufacturing and the ability to spend his own money on a campaign.

But Lee has all but gone underground since Wednesday, speaking briefly to key contacts to let them know of his decision.

Republicans, in return, were distancing themselves from him.

"I think it's very embarrassing for the individual," said Monroe County Republican Chairman Bill Reilich.

"It's one of those things that happens, something you can't predict or anticipate."

State Conservative Party Chairman Mike Long said he didn't think Lee's actions tarnished the conservative philosophy.

"When an individual makes a very bad choice, it's the individual and his family that suffers," Long said.

Lee never seemed to be a politician who craved the spotlight and didn't appear to be a natural campaigner in the way some politicians are, and his personal financial situation doesn't require him to work, so it doesn't appear likely at this time that he'll be making any public comebacks.

Former Gov. Eliot Spitzer, who found rebirth on the airwaves as host of a prime-time cable news show after a prostitution scandal in March 2008, reflected on public downfalls in an interview with the website Big Think last May.

"There's often not a lot of subtlety to the things that cause trouble and it's not a lack of capacity to distinguish between right and wrong, it's the failure to exercise that judgment at the particular moment, whether out of hubris, out of a sense of entitlement, out of a sense of adrenaline, whatever it may be," he said.

"It's stupidity that brings people down."

JTERRERI@DemocratandChronicle.com
