In politics there is nothing worse than not being talked about. For the better part of six years, that fate has befallen New Jersey's Gubernatorial Public Financing Program. The State's Election Law Enforcement Commission has repeatedly said that "New Jersey's excellent Gubernatorial Public Financing program needs some important fine-tuning," but the program has not been modified since 1980.

But why is it necessary to modify a program that has worked so well? Because without changing its various limits and thresholds to keep the program at pace with inflation the very health of public financing in the Garden State is threatened.

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Candidates for governor since the general election of 1977 have participated in the program because there is broad public support for it and because the various limits and thresholds have, up to now, permitted them to undertake serious campaigns.

This may not be the case if the program is not amended soon. The program may limp through the 1989 elections with wide-ranging participation by candidates, but that participation will start to drop off in the 1990's as gubernatorial campaigns gamble that their candidate's chances of winning are better if they do not participate in a public financing program containing unrealistic limits and thresholds.

This would surely be a shame! Since its inception in 1977, New Jersey's partial public financing program has allowed viable candidates to run for governor who might not otherwise have been able to because of limited personal wealth. Moreover, it has eliminated undue influence from gubernatorial elections.

As the mainstay of the gubernatorial elections process, the program has distributed approximately $17.1 million in public funds and given 24 serious candidates the opportunity to run for the State's highest office.

By pulling the rug out from under this popular program (New Jersey has a phenomenal tax check-off rate of almost 40 percent) because of a failure to adjust it for inflation would be counter to the public good.

Without doubt the debilitating effect of creeping inflation is made abundantly clear in the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission's recent publication, 1988 Gubernatorial Cost Analysis Report.

In this report, the Commission estimates that the costs of campaigning for governor in 1989 will have increased by 60.3 percent since 1981, the last time the thresholds and limits of the public financing program were adjusted.

Putting this figure into perspective, the estimated eight-year rise in campaign costs is almost double that of the projected inflation rate for the same period. Using the U.S. Labor Department's actual six-year (1981-87) Consumer Price Index (CPI) measure of inflation and combining it with the two-year projection of the Congressional Budget Office, the Commission estimates an eight-year rise in general inflation of 35.4 percent.

In specific terms what this means to the gubernatorial public financing program is this: the value of an $800 contribution in 1981 would erode in value by $209 and be worth only $591 in 1989.

Campaigns would be forced into spending more of their time trying to raise maximum contributions, yet would not be able to buy as much with these funds, nor communicate as well with the voters, as they did in past elections.

Moreover, if general inflation has this impact upon the contribution limit, and therefore on campaigns, consider the toll on it and other provisions of the program when put in the context of campaign cost inflation, which is almost double the CPI.

The impact on a participating campaign's ability to present its candidate's message to the voters will become increasingly more devastating, a development that does not bode well for public financing or the process of gubernatorial elections in New Jersey.

For instance, the report concludes that there has been a trend toward spending on mass communications since the general election of 1973. And this strategy, which is the result of cultural and social development as well as the weakening of the party system, is not cheap.

Between 1973 and 1985, the proportion of total campaign expenditures
made for mass communications by
general election candidates for gover­
nor have increased by 56 percent. In
1973, 54 percent of all expenditures
went toward mass communications,
compared with 84 percent in 1985.

And even more significant is the fact
that the trend within the mass com­
munications category is toward spend­
ing on broadcast media as a means of
reaching a mass audience.

During the general election of 1985,
gubernatorial candidates spent 87 per­
cent of their communication budget on
radio and television. This compares
with 45 percent spent by candidate
Brendan T. Byrne on broadcast media
in the general election of 1973. Only
Byrne provided a breakdown of com­
munication expenditures in that year.
To say that this approach is expensive is
an understatement. Overall television
advertising costs will increase by a
projected 77 percent between 1981 and
1989 and overall radio advertising costs
will rise by a projected 68 percent.

New Jersey, which is serviced by New
York and Philadelphia media, is in one
of the most expensive media markets in
the country. A 30-second prime time
political advertisement on New York
television can cost $25,000 and in
Philadelphia it can cost as high as
$14,000. Similarly, a "20 plan" radio ad­
vancing package on a New York radio
station can cost $2,004.

Reasonable changes to the
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The point is this: reasonable changes
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Jersey if public financing is to avoid the
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Some legislators have introduced
legislation that would amend gob-
natorial public financing. State Senators
Richard Zimmer (R-23rd District) and
Richard Van Wagner (D-19th District)
and Assemblymen Robert Martin (R-
26th District) and Dennis Riley (D-4th
District) have all introduced bills that in
one way or another modify the program.

The Election Law Enforcement Com­
mision, too, has made recommenda­
tions that would bring the program in
line with inflation. These recommenda­
tions were made public in a report on the
1985 gubernatorial election published
in September 1986.

The one recommendation that breaks
new ground and would permanently
keep the program current with inflation
is to link the various thresholds and
limits to the Consumer Price Index. An
alternative is to use the Election Law
Enforcement Commission’s campaign
cost inflation estimate, contained in its
recent cost report, to adjust the program.
If the public financing law were
amended in either way, the program
would always remain viable and an in­
tegral part of the elections process.

Other Commission recommendations
would work to that end as well. For in­
stance, removing the expenditure limits
would encourage candidates to take
public funding and simultaneously dis­
courage independent expenditures by
groups not connected with the cam­
paigns.

Moreover, in this age when statewide
campaigns for governor are reliant on
mass communications to get their
candidate’s message to the voters,
elimination of the expenditure limit
would allow them to do just that.

And if the recommendations of the
Commission were followed, candidates
would pay for this message through a
large pool of small donations, thus
demonstrating broad based support in
the process.

It makes perfect sense!
Yes! But one person’s antidote is
another’s poison. In the world of
politics and government what may seem
the ideal solution may not be doable in
practice.

Nevertheless, some type of reform that
realistically adjusts the contribution
limit, expenditure limits, public funds
caps, qualifying threshold, and perhaps
even the public private funds mix is
needed.

In a phrase, the New Jersey program
has four goals: to help candidates of
limited means, to eliminate undue in­
fluence, to preserve public funds, and to
be simple to administer and com­
prehend.

These goals can only continue to be
met through legislation that alters this
very worthwhile program in a way that
removes its vulnerability to inflationary
pressures, and thereby retains its ability
to attract the participation of those who
would seek the most powerful office in
the State.