

The Economist

Andrew Cuomo: Next, walk on water

*A New York governor is actually governing
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FOR four years New York was adrift. When Eliot Spitzer, a crusading lawyer, became governor in 2007, his uncompromising ways caused political gridlock in Albany, the state capital. Just over a year later, he was caught frolicking with a prostitute and resigned. His successor, David Paterson, was affable enough, but too weak to push the state legislature to balance the books. When Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat like his predecessors, handily won the 2010 governor's race on a promise to "rebuild the government, restore competence, restore trust, [and] get the people of this state believing once again", New Yorkers gave a cynical snort.

But Mr Cuomo has had an extraordinary year. In the first six months of his term he could point to three historic achievements. First, he balanced the budget: not only bringing spending under control – filling a \$10 billion hole and nudging the public-sector unions to make concessions worth \$450m – but putting mechanisms in place to control spending in future. He even got the cantankerous legislature to agree. In June Mr Cuomo brought in a cap on property taxes, in a state which the Tax Foundation ranks as the sixth-most-taxed in the country. **Robert Ward of the Rockefeller Institute called it "the biggest change in New York's fiscal policy since the creation of Medicaid", almost 50 years ago.**

Then, also in June, Mr Cuomo signed a bill legalising same-sex marriage, having worked hard to drive the bill through the Republican-controlled state Senate. In December he got

bipartisan backing to change the income-tax code, which he says will generate \$1.9 billion in additional revenue for the state. It sets in place the lowest tax rate for the middle class in 58 years, while – according to Mr Cuomo's opponents and the Manhattan Institute – leaving the tax burden on the richest at its highest level since 1986.

Still, most New Yorkers are not upset with him. Indeed, they rate him very highly. He learnt much about Albany politics at the knee of his father, Mario, a former governor. He is clever and determined. His most noticeable flaw is his arrogance, which he has tried to keep in check, but which slipped out in November when he remarked: "I am the government."

In that case, his cockiness was accurate. There is not much transparency in how he is getting the results, notes Gerald Benjamin of the State University of New York at New Paltz. Disappointingly, it is still three men (Mr Cuomo, the assembly Speaker and the Senate president) in a room making all the decisions.

And there are some big ones ahead. Mr Cuomo is promising to veto any redistricting plan from the legislature which does not come from an independent commission. He wants to expand gambling in the state, infuriating the Indian nations who run its casinos at the moment. Rather bizarrely, he wants to build America's biggest convention centre in Queens. And he plans to make a start on pension reform.

The thorniest issue he faces is fracking, a controversial drilling technique in which high-pressure water and chemicals are pumped into a bore-hole to ease the extraction

of natural gas. New York has a moratorium on the practice, but new rules from the state environment department may allow it. Gas exploration could bring in badly needed jobs and money, but opponents worry that fracking may contaminate the drinking water. If Mr Cuomo

can sort that tangle out, says Doug Muzzio, a political scientist at Baruch College, "the next thing he's going to do is walk on water."