



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Malcolm Smith

The Senate Minority Calls For Reform Of Senate Rules Good Government Groups Offer Support For Senate Minority Proposals

MALCOLM A. SMITH January 15, 2007

ALBANY—The Senate's Minority Conference today proposed changes to the Senate rules that would bring greater integrity to the legislative body, making it more accountable, more transparent, and more democratic.

Good government groups, including the Brennan Center for Justice, the League of Women Voters, Common Cause, the New York Public Interest Research Group and Citizens' Union circulated a letter to all State Senators, calling on them to support the rules reforms offered by the Senate Minority.

The Senate Minority proposals would prohibit Senators from accepting gifts and would provide for full and complete disclosure of member items in budget bills, including the name of the sponsoring Senator, funding recipient and amount of funding. Additionally, member item funding for private, for-profit entities would be banned.

The Senate Minority also proposed reforming a rule that currently allows Senators to escape accountability for some of their votes. Senate Majority six years ago changed the rules so that votes on motions to discharge a bill from committee are not recorded, allowing Senators

to kill off important legislation without having to be held responsible for their votes.

The Senate Minority would also change the rules governing distribution of resources to rank and file Senators. Currently, the Majority Leader distributes staff and other resources as he sees fit, allowing him to reward Senators for their blind allegiance and punish them if they were to speak out against the Leader. Under the Senate Minority proposal, all Senators would receive equal staffing and other resources to serve their constituents.

Senate Democratic Leader Malcolm A. Smith (D-Queens) said "We cannot truly reform the legislative process in Albany until we have successfully reformed the rules that govern the legislature. Today, we have an opportunity to reform our rules and change the way we do business."

Senator Liz Krueger (D-Manhattan) said despite the support for reform offered by good government advocates and from virtually every editorial board in the State, she expects a significant floor fight from the Senate's Majority Conference. "The people of New York have spoken and sent a clear message that they want to see fundamental reform of our legislative process," she said. "I call on my Majority colleagues to abandon our current failed structure of centralized leadership that effectively disenfranchises half the people of New York State."

Senator John Sampson (D-Brooklyn) said, "If the Senate Majority vote down our proposals despite the widespread support those proposals have received, it will be a clear indication that the Senate Majority are either not listening to the voice of the people, or are ignoring the voice of the people."

Senator Martin Connor said, "I sincerely hope the Senate Majority will heed the clarion call of

New York's voters. The people want an open, responsive Legislature, wherein all the elected representatives are empowered to serve their constituents while adhering to the highest ethical standards. Should they reject our Rules proposals, this majority will be standing by the discredited old ways of doing business in Albany."

The letter from the good government advocates to every member of the Senate reads, in part, "Today, you will have a chance to adopt new Senate rules that could dramatically improve the internal operating rules of the Senate by making it more open, Senate Minority and accountable to all New Yorkers. Our organizations have long advocated for reform in this area, and we urge you to seize this critical opportunity."

The rules of the Senate govern all aspects of the Senate's operations. The Majority has come under criticism from good government groups and the State's major newspapers for creating rules that make the Senate undemocratic, ineffective and unaccountable.

Among the changes proposed by Senate Minority:

- Member Items Changes: Provides for full and complete disclosure of items in budget bills, including name of sponsor, funding recipient and amount of funding. Member item funding for

private, for-profit entities banned. All member items will be disclosed on the Senate web site.

- Elimination of the "canvass of agreement" provision: Negative votes on future motions to petition a bill or resolution out of committee, as well as hostile amendments, will be recorded.

Limits on discharge motions will be removed.

- Ethical Standards: Bans members from receiving all gifts except ones of small or limited value.
 - Conference Committee: Creates a new standing conference committee and a process to conference similar—but not "same as"—bills.
 - Equal appropriation of resources for all Senators: Each lawmaker will be provided with the same number of staff and resources. Senate committee membership—and the staff and resources that come along with it – will be allocated proportionally according to Majority/Minority representation.
 - Rules Changes: Eliminates the requirement that such changes be referred to the Rules Committee for consideration and creates a new Rules and Administration Committee, complete with administrative oversight.
 - Committee Reforms: Allows Ranking Minority Members or 1/3 of committee members to place a bill on the committee agenda or hold public hearings, unless a majority of committee members object. Committee members will be required to attend all future meetings. Detailed committee reports will be made available to the public on the Internet.
 - Off the Floor Changes: Prohibits off the floor Committee meetings, unless agreed upon by a Ranking Member or 2/3 of all members.
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