



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Andrea Stewart-Cousins

Senator Andrea Stewart-Cousins Statement on Senate Stalemate

ANDREA STEWART-COUSINS July 7, 2009

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Dear Friends,

Please allow me to take this opportunity to share some important information with you. As you know, I ran for the New York State Senate on a platform of real reform. The events that have recently taken place in Albany are frustrating, and many of you have expressed to me that you share my frustration. However, there is a very important point here, one that you won't necessarily extract from the daily headlines about "coups" and "power grabs" and "crises" in our newspapers or on local television news.

It is my belief that the attempted transfer of power in the Senate had nothing to do with reform, and was simply an attempt by the minority party and a disaffected "Democrat" to prevent the passage of vital, progressive legislation that would deliver on the promises that many of my colleagues and I made to our constituents – to protect affordable housing, to provide accessible healthcare, to preserve quality public education, to ensure real tax relief, and to reform State government. Claims to the contrary actually fall short of reason. After five months of transition and governing, the same group of Senators who had controlled the legislative agenda and operations of the Senate for the previous 43 years, without any balance, equity or transparency, now claim that their leadership is necessary in order to

enact reform. Their subsequent attempt to install themselves into leadership, a flagrant violation of the rules which govern the Senate, and to name a new President of the Senate, who would be next in line to be Governor of the State of New York, is an outrageous act, which illustrates the philosophy by which they governed for decades.

What I also believe, however, is that as a Democratic conference, we were certainly not without fault, because we should have moved more quickly to advance our agenda of change and reform, and to correct the disparities which have defined the status quo for half a century. Since the first day that I declared my candidacy for this office, and through the subsequent campaigns with all of their ups and downs -- the court decision that I was 18 votes short of a victory in 2004, and ultimately my election and re-election victories in 2006 and 2008 -- I have been an advocate for laws that ensure accountability and correct disenfranchisement and inequality, as well as an advocate for Senate rules which distribute resources fairly, to ensure that our collective constituency of ALL New Yorkers are best served by their government as a whole.

Our Democratic leadership did introduce new rules that improved transparency, made it easier to move bills to the floor, and offered a broader proposal for significant reforms of the committee process, which resulted in the passage of bi-partisan legislation and the emergence of a new spirit of cooperation that seemed to be more regularly transcending the figurative and literal "aisle" in our Chamber. However, more remained to be done, and we need a policy put into place for the equitable distribution of resources. Unfortunately, it requires more than a few months to unravel decades of dysfunction. And now we are here at this point, where it is important to me that you understand, we cannot leave until real reform is achieved.

One potential result from this situation is that the Senate may be forced to change its model of operations, given that we now face an equally divided body. The Senate Democrats have

already proposed a bipartisan operating agreement to the Republicans, used in numerous other states and the U.S. Senate when they found themselves in similar circumstances, to circumvent the gridlock created by a 50-50 split in the Senate.

The proposal [is attached] includes:

- A rotating Presiding Officer of the Senate, alternating daily, one each to be designated by the Democratic Conference and the Republican Conference, respectively.
- Establishing a six-member Senate Conference Committee, comprised of three members designated by the Democratic Conference and three members designated by the Republican Conference, to determine which bills and resolutions will reach the floor, and
- Rotating Floor Leaders, alternating daily, one each to be designated by the Democratic Conference and the Republican Conference, respectively.

Unfortunately, so far, this proposal has been soundly rejected by the Republicans who would rather let government grind to a halt than give up their last chance of having power. This is not the time for smoke and mirrors, and frankly, the ceremonial cannot be allowed to trump the substantive. I firmly believe that unless or until my colleagues on the other side of that aisle agree to negotiate, in good faith, the terms of a real power-sharing agreement, based on principles of accountability and reform, that we cannot acquiesce to their illegal demands, we cannot cower because the headlines are not always in our favor, and we cannot settle for anything less than the representation that the majority of New Yorkers voted for last November.

This process, while admittedly frustrating, will determine whether or not I am able to honor the promises that I made to you when you elected me to the Senate. For many New Yorkers, it will also determine the ability to access housing, healthcare and quality education, or to achieve lasting tax relief.

I am not still in Albany fighting for power for myself or for my paycheck, despite what the opponents of real reform would like you to believe. I remain in Albany, past the close of the regular Session, often with the gavel in my own hand, fighting for your power. It was your commitment to ending business as usual and to real reform that brought me to this place, to empower all New Yorkers equally. I do not intend to give up or to let you down for any reason. I promise you that I will continue to be a force for positive change and for real reform. You deserve nothing less.

Sincerely,

Andrea Stewart-Cousins

35th District