



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

George Winner

Welcome to a new Albany?

GEORGE WINNER November 9, 2010

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There's still plenty of unresolved business coming out of the 2010 elections. There's a lot of vote-counting left to do, and it will be weeks, maybe months before anyone can offer any truly accurate assessment of the impact this election cycle has had on politics and government in New York State and nationally.

But one thing we can say for sure is that, just like in the words of the old song, "a change is gonna come."

It sure is. And the state of where it all stands in New York was reflected in the days following Election Day with headlines like “Now comes the real fight” and “Rough road is ahead.”

What each of those headlines and the articles they accompanied reflected, of course, was this fact: now that the campaigns are over, now that the advertising has run its course and the rhetoric has quieted, it's time to get down to the business and the hard work of government.

It's not going to be easy, because with the nation still in the economic doldrums, to say the least, the choices are incredibly difficult. As I wind down my own service as a member of the State Legislature until the end of the year, I can say that I don't envy the legislative task ahead.

It was summed up this way by one long-time Albany newsman, “Now comes the really hard part.” He's absolutely right, of course, when he goes on to note that Governor-elect Andrew Cuomo now must “move swiftly on his pledge to rebuild the state's crippled economy, cut spending and drain state government's notorious cesspool of corruption.”

And that's just for starters. Already we've seen the Paterson administration in the past week signal that New York will be forced to close an even higher state budget deficit next year. Why? In large part because of higher-than-expected Medicaid spending during the current fiscal year (surprise, surprise) accompanied by a downtick in some revenues.

The Paterson announcement led one widely experienced hand in government finance, E.J. McMahon of the Empire Center for New York State Policy, to write, “The Empire State's fiscal problems are simply too massive to permit further dithering, buck-passing and corner-cutting... Throughout his campaign, Cuomo explicitly and repeatedly promised to hold the line on spending and broad-based taxes. The new numbers mean he can't keep that promise

unless the first budget of his tenure cuts spending below current levels. This will require a pitched battle with Medicaid providers and health-care-worker unions, who will spend millions of dollars on ad campaigns designed to drive the new governor's poll ratings into the basement. But the Medicaid fight won't be the main event. Indeed, balancing the state budget alone is only part of the challenge he faces. The overriding pocketbook issue -- one that will ultimately determine the political success or failure of the next Cuomo administration -- will be property taxes."

So, welcome to Albany in 2011. I sure have witnessed tough times in New York State many times before. Governor Hugh Carey, back in the mid-1970's, once famously told New Yorkers that the "days of wine and roses, are over" as he confronted the fiscal crisis of his time. The early years of the 1980's, under then-Governor Mario Cuomo, were sure no walk in the park for any of us. And when then-Governor George Pataki first took office in 1995, he faced a multi-billion-dollar budget deficit before he even walked through the door.

Now the wheel turns once again, and the spotlight shines on Governor-elect Andrew Cuomo beginning in January.

One of the main differences this time, though, is that the electorate is as restless, as uncertain, as unsettled, and as unpredictable as I've ever seen it. I've said since the outset of this current fiscal crisis that it was a long time in coming to reach this point in state government, and it has called for carefully but deliberately finding a way out of it. But there was nothing careful or deliberate about the Democratic rush to raise taxes and spending over the past two years, and it made things a lot worse.

So it's going to take some time to turn it around, and it deserves patience, but does anyone believe that the public is going to be satisfied with that pace of change? That's the No. 1 challenge, and it's going to make for some interesting days ahead

