



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Ruth Hassell-Thompson

Time for Republicans to Clean Their Ears

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Dean Skelos, the Majority Leader of the New York State Senate, tried to be funny when he quipped that proposed legislation targeted to partially respond to illegal stop and frisks would allow people to “walk around with 10 joints in each ear.” However, it was one of those proffered jokes where nobody in the room laughed but Dean Skelos. It is most obvious that the Republican Leadership is not listening to the hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers who have been victims of illegal stop and frisks. In 2011, the NYPD stopped 684,000 individuals. 87% of the people stopped were people of color and nine of every ten were released without any further legal action taken against them. With its nearly-chart topping year in 2011, the NYPD has made more than 100,000 marijuana possession arrests for the last two years; nearly 150,000 marijuana possession arrests in the last three years; and more than 227,000 marijuana possession arrests in the last five years. One out of every seven arrests in New York City is for marijuana possession comprising 15% of all arrests in NYC.

When Hakim Jeffries and I first introduced this bill in the State Legislature in 2009-10, many legislators stopped laughing when they realized the constitutional impact of arbitrary or capricious police stops against the citizenry. Still other legislators were stunned when Queens College Professor Dr. Harry

Levine estimated that New York City spent \$50 - \$100 million on marijuana arrests in 2010 alone.

In 2010, I agreed to permit Republican Senator Mark Grisanti to become the primary sponsor of my bill which would make public possession of small amounts of marijuana a violation instead of a B misdemeanor. Under the proposed legislation, the police could still take an offender off the street and lock-up offenders until criminal court arraignment. Thus, the law would still have teeth in its bite. It was my hope that Senator Grisanti, could persuade his fellow Republicans to take their heads out of the sand and change the law. Unfortunately, this did not work out well.

Today, a Governor Cuomo supports the bill, NYPD Police Commissioner Ray Kelly supports the bill, all of the city's district attorneys support the bill and even Kathleen Rice, Senator Skelos' own district attorney supports the bill. And as I stated, a Republican Senator is now the prime sponsor. Scores of organizations support the bill and respected media like the **New York Times** supports the bill. This is one of the few pieces of legislation where left wing and right wing have agreed to fly together in the direction of justice.

Come join us Senator Skelos. We would welcome your support.

Ruth Hassell-Thompson is the Chairwoman of the NYS Senate Democratic Conference, Chairwoman of the Conference of Black Senators, Executive Board Member of the NYS Black, Puerto Rican, Hispanic and Asian Legislative Caucus and one of the leading feminist voices in New York State.