



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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From the Desk of Senator Jack M. Martins

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And Now This

So here we are again. You may recall that when I ran for the Senate nearly three years ago, I, like many of you, was angry at our government in Albany. As a local mayor for eight years, I knew with frustrating clarity just how out-of-touch Albany had become to the plight of everyday people. And I wasn't alone. Republicans and Democrats alike, young and old, were demanding change and I wanted to be a part of it. We'd had enough of bad decisions impacting our communities, of back-room deals, of legislators spending more time in the courthouse than the statehouse. We were done watching Nero fiddle while Rome burned.

There was a true sense of urgency in that group that marched into Albany together three years ago, made all the more concrete by the election of a new Governor who shared our commitment. And even if no one else could feel it, sitting in those chambers, there was a sense of hope among us.

We took that hope and began at the beginning, submitting the first on-time budget in decades, and that hope grew a little. We didn't raise a single tax or fee and hope grew a little more. We worked hours into the night to close billion-dollar budget gaps and lower taxes and hope grew even more. Then we did it again. And then a third time and even with the pitfalls

we came to value compromise and hope flourished. And dare I say there was even some cautious back-slapping about the new day seemingly dawning in Albany.

And now this: the arrest of two legislators and the tarnished resignation of another. With this comes an outpouring of anger with calls for investigative commissions, new ethics laws, public campaign funding and term limits. These are all understandable reactions but quite frankly, they don't address the root cause of these scandals. Our laws and ethics rules already clearly state that elected officials shall not accept or give bribes. What will the proposed new laws, regulations or commissions do but underscore what already exists?

So let's talk about what's really going on here – bad people are being elected to important positions because there's no structure in place to truly vet them. The fact is that all of these scandals stem from audacity; an audacity born from purposefully choosing to ignore the law for their own personal benefit. Laws don't apply to them. People get greedy when they get that comfortable, when there's nobody there to put a check on them.

Now, in the wake of the recent indictments, there are calls from special interests for ethics reform; new, stricter rules; and public financing of campaigns. But you can't legislate morality and good judgment – only punishment when people break the rules. These legislators didn't do what they did because there were no rules against it. They did it because they thought, with boastful arrogance, that they could get away with it. Our challenge then must be to meaningfully restore integrity to the selection process that chooses these candidates and places them on the ballot to begin with. Simply put, we must answer two worrisome questions: "How did these guys get on the ballot?" And much more important, "Who put them there?"

These are uncomfortable issues to be sure, but when I was elected I promised to tell you like it is. And this is like it is: corruption surely exists in Albany but if we're not judicious in our

approach, we will actually be making things worse. There are those who would try to hijack this crisis to their own agenda – try to push for things that won't make a difference for the sake of optics. The truth is only one thing can effectively cultivate better government and better candidates: your vote. In any given election every two years (not four!) you have the ability to refresh Albany with new ideas and better people. There I said it – but it needs saying. Albany needs better people and that only happens through citizen involvement in a system that filters out the ethically challenged; one that ensures that only people with integrity make it onto the ballot in the first place.

I've often written that one of my central goals is to help restore the faith of New Yorkers in government. I appreciate that constituents will not agree with all of my positions all of the time. But I am committed, in these weekly columns and at meetings throughout our district, to foster an honest dialogue. Voters are owed at least that much. In the weeks to come I will be working with my colleagues and Governor Cuomo to address the issue of corruption, and I hope that we will develop some honest solutions that can restore some of what has been damaged these past few weeks.

I still have hope but am now more resolved than ever to find real solutions.