



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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BI-PARTISAN VOTES WERE GOOD, BRINGING REAL POTENTIAL FOR CHANGE; THE CHALLENGE IS WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

JOHN J. BONACIC June 16, 2009

Last week two Democrat Senators – Pedro Espada and Hiram Monserrate left their Democratic Caucus to vote for new Senate rules which empower “rank and file” members of the Senate. For that vote, they were promptly called a “thief” and a “thug” by Austin Shafran, who is the official spokesman for New York Democrats in the Senate.

Yesterday, one of them – Sen. Monserrate went back to the Senate Democratic caucus. Apparently a thug last week is a hero this week, so long as a Democrat has that person’s vote. I am not here to defend Sen. Monserrate. He faces serious criminal charges, and if found guilty will be expelled from the Senate for his conduct, and go to jail, as he should.

I do, however, defend the very good vote he and 31 others cast for real rules reform. Democrats campaigned last year promising to “clean up” Albany and enact the necessary reforms. Since Sen. Smith and his hand-picked Secretary of the Senate took charge of the Senate however, neither reforms, nor good policies for the Hudson Valley and Catskills have been enacted.

Instead, New Yorkers got a secretive budget process that raised taxes on health insurance, electricity, and small businesses; a new MTA tax which raises property taxes in the Hudson Valley and hurts small business; geographic discrimination where groups north of Westchester County which count on State aid were cut, simply because their local representative was of a different political party; saw middle class property tax rebates eliminated, and were subjected to a string of broken promises on issues such as school property tax reform, health insurance, and job creation would be substantively and publicly addressed.

I can tell you first-hand that standing up to those in charge is not easy. However, the State Legislature – which was supposed to become functional under one party rule, has instead been run worse

than ever. The Rules changes enacted last week now give every New Yorker an equal voice in the Senate – which has never happened before in Albany.

Since those new rules were adopted, Republicans have gone to the Senate multiple times to try and conduct business – pass bills and address issues. Other than one Democrat, the remainder of Democrats in the Senate – who are overwhelmingly from New York City, refused to vote on any bills. They are refusing to come to work but, as one Democrat joked earlier in the year, are still collecting thousands of dollars a day just for hanging around Albany.

Democrats like Senator Smith say reform can be accomplished by simply putting a different person on the dais each day. That is not reform, that is just re-arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. In order to have any type of sincere “power sharing” effort, the following must be addressed:

1. A new Secretary of the Senate. Simply put, the current Secretary of the Senate, Angelo Aponte, is not the right person for the job. We should have a career government administrator in this role who is apolitical. The Secretary of the Senate should be an administrator, not a policy maker.
2. Senate Committees need new Chairs. Whether it is co-chairs or simply new Chair appointments based on skill and background, the current committee Chair selection process is not reasonable. Some Senators openly extorted former Majority Leader Smith, only promising to vote for him if they would receive committee assignments. If that was how Directors were elected to corporations, the extortionists would go to jail, yet in the State Legislature, you actually get rewarded.
3. Staff allocations. When I was in the Senate Republican Majority under Senator Bruno, I fought for equal staff allocations. Senator Smith – the Senate’s Democratic leader at the start of 2009, supported that principle in 2007 and 2008. Yet when he became Majority Leader he abandoned that concept and fired staff who have worked for years – decades in instances, for no other reason than their political enrollment. Staff for jobs such as printing, accounting, human resources, postal services, and research should be hired based on their professional qualifications, not political enrollment.
4. Funding for Districts. Under State law, funds were appropriated to various projects last year. Secretary of the Senate Aponte has illegally stopped the processing of those grants. Likewise, despite campaigning as “reformers”, Democrats continued the Bruno tradition of allocating grants to Members Districts based on their personal loyalty to the Senate leadership rather than the need of the community.

The votes for Rules reforms by 32 Senators last week was a shock to Albany's power system. Albany needed a shock though. New Yorkers face serious issues: escalating property taxes, crime on the rise in our inner cities, an upstate economy which is chasing New Yorkers out of our State, and a hopelessness that too many New Yorkers feel. The new Senate rules are not a panacea, but for the first time, rank and file members will have a much broader participatory role in our Legislature. Hearing the views of all New Yorkers, rather than just those of a closed, New York City based Democratic caucus can only be considered a good thing, even if it took an odd combination to make it happen.

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