



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

James L. Seward

Time Is Now For Real Reform

JAMES L. SEWARD June 11, 2009

Recent events in Albany have sparked a new day of reform that will mean a great deal for the residents of New York state. The changes came amidst a dramatic, historic week at the Capitol, and the results will mean a more open, transparent government that will provide equitable representation for all New Yorkers.

There were many reasons this change took place, most of them revolve around broken promises by those who took power earlier this year. Empty proclamations calling for a more open budget process, greater use of conference committees and fiscal restraint were made by the political bosses. But in reality we watched as the budget was formulated in secret by three New York City officials, bipartisan conference committees were completely eliminated and a state budget that increases spending by 9 times the rate of inflation was approved.

Among the greatest accomplishments touted by the Democratic leadership – the bottle bill and new drug laws. Both of these items were hidden in the state budget and have left the state facing some serious problems. A judge's order has put off the implementation of the bottle bill, leaving a \$115 million hole in the state's financial plan. The drug law changes include a dangerous provision which will allow felony drug offenders to have their records sealed, hiding their criminal past from potential employers. This means they can wind up working in schools, day care centers and nursing homes, placing our most vulnerable citizens at risk.

Now with a new bipartisan senate reform majority in place, we are already making strides to return fairness and balance to the state. Moments after the leadership change, I voted for real reforms that open up the legislative process, empower individual legislators, slap term limits on legislative leaders, ensure bipartisan participation, greater debate and the equal sharing of resources for staff and community funding initiatives. These are reforms that have been championed for years by good government groups.

Coalition government is not an uncommon concept. In fact, it currently is in place and working in five different states. The state senates in New Mexico and Alaska are operated by coalition government, as are the lower houses in Texas, Tennessee and Louisiana. It is a proven form of leadership that brings all ideas to the table and provides each and every state lawmaker with a real voice, in turn empowering all citizens.

Along with bringing openness and transparency to the senate, the new leadership coalition will be moving forward on property tax relief and job creation. These are two initiatives which must be accomplished in short order to help turn the state's economy around. Unfortunately, the leaders who held the keys to the senate for the past five months didn't see these as priorities. They were more concerned with offices and parking spaces, and because of that, unemployment has continued to rise, and businesses and families are fleeing the state.

Time is running out on the current session. Record state spending was approved and taxpayers have to foot the bill through billions of dollars in new taxes and fees. While some have been critical over the timing of this leadership change, I say we could wait no longer. We must achieve better results for taxpayers, businesses and working families all across this state; a job that was not being done by the former leader.

Now is the time to move forward with the people's business. There are many vital issues that need to be covered starting with lowering taxes, reducing spending and making a new found commitment to economic growth and the creation of good paying jobs.

I have worked in a bipartisan way with officials in my district and at the capital over the years, and the focus of the new senate reform majority will be a bipartisan approach that solves problems and delivers results – and ends Albany's dysfunctional culture of finger pointing and blame.