



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

David J. Valesky

Rules Reform: A New Day Dawns in State Senate

DAVID J. VALESKY July 17, 2009

For the past five weeks, I have had individuals across Central New York tell me that the time has come for real and significant reforms. To each, I have said simply, I agree.

For the past five years, I have been advocating for a more open, responsive and responsible state Senate, one that empowers individuals members of the Senate, ends the tyranny of Senate leadership and puts the people back in charge of this chamber.

This week, after five weeks of frustration and five years of pushing and prodding on my part, a new day has dawned in the Senate. We finally took up and adopted the historic and unprecedented rules reforms for which I have so long advocated.

The rules we put in place will truly transform our state government and put the power back in the hands of the people. These changes include term limits on leadership and committee chairs; new methods for members to move critical legislation with or without the blessing of leadership; equalized base staff allocation for all senators regardless of party; and more equal access to legislative grants. These reforms will serve to empower all 62 senators, and thereby, all 19.5 million New Yorkers.

Reform has been a focus for me and several of my colleagues for many years. While in the

minority, we lived under the cloud of an iron-fisted, leader-controlled system. We saw firsthand how difficult it could be to adequately represent our constituents when faced with grossly inequitable resources and an inability to affect legislation—even to co-sponsor a local bill.

So, over the years, many of my colleagues and I became outspoken supporters of reform, demanding change to end the dysfunction. While in the minority, we focused our efforts on shining a light on the dysfunctional, disparate practices that maintained a stranglehold on the Senate. We conducted research, released reports and held statewide hearings.

You, the people, agreed—how the Senate operated was not fair, and should be changed. Editorial boards called for reform. Good government groups implored the then-majority to change its ways.

In January, 2009, when the Democrats won a majority in the Senate, it became clear that the road to reform was finally being constructed. We made good strides, immediately adopting changes to make the body more democratic, and planned to enact more reforms and rules changes before the end of the legislative session.

Unfortunately, we hit a bump in the road during the Senate stalemate, and these efforts ground to a halt. It is often said that with every crisis comes an opportunity. Our opportunity here was to finally gain bipartisan support for reform.

With these reforms, we will change more than our internal operations. We will change our way of thinking. And I, like many of my colleagues who have beat the drum for reform all these years, am gratified that today we will see real and definitive results. I have always believed that to move the Senate forward in the best interests of the people of New York

State, real and substantive reform must be a cornerstone; now, I believe we have that cornerstone in place.