



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Jack M. Martins

From the Desk of Senator Jack M. Martins

JACK M. MARTINS January 19, 2016

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Ever since you sent me to Albany five years ago, I've often repeated that one of my fundamental goals was to help restore the faith of everyday New Yorkers in state government. While this may be less concrete than some of my other, more specific policy goals, I maintain that it is the core, the foundation if you will, for all our other work. You see, nothing undermines the American spirit more surely than corruption in government. It erodes trust, breeds cynicism and eventually leads to indifference – a belief that our participation doesn't really matter.

Admittedly, each new round of disclosures takes the wind out of my sails, and this year's been no different, but I remain steadfast in this effort, which is why I have repeatedly voted to strengthen the ethics laws. While I know all too well that it's impossible to earn perfect consensus among my constituents, I am committed in these weekly columns to encouraging conversations, no matter how difficult or uncomfortable they may make people. In that light, I want to tell you about a couple of pieces of legislation that I've long supported but that have been continuously swept under the rug by those who'd rather see them disappear.

The first was a common sense proposal that has been part of the Senate rules for all the years I've been a member – a term limit on leadership posts and committee chairmanships.

It has long been speculated that the accumulation of power through these positions over time makes legislators less responsive and can actually strangle the legislative process itself – limiting those involved in policy discussions to a very few. While the Senate has embraced this good government initiative through its own rules process and passed legislation requiring the same be applied to both houses, the Assembly has unfortunately refused to do the same. With new leadership, it was hoped that the Assembly would advance this simple, but meaningful, measure. Unfortunately, they have not.

Second, while we were negotiating the state budget last year, my fellow Senators and I passed an amendment to the state's constitution that would strip public officials of their taxpayer-funded pensions should they be convicted of felony corruption. Frankly, it seems so sensible that many people mistakenly assumed that this was already the case, but sadly it isn't. So together we passed a simple, straight forward measure: If you're convicted of corruption, of breaking the public's trust, the public is no longer responsible for paying you a healthy pension for the rest of your life. It's a concept that applies to most of the real world. If you break an agreement with somebody, in this case the public, the deal is off. After all, why should they have to honor their end of the agreement when you didn't honor yours?

Unfortunately, despite continuous assurances from the Assembly that it would give first passage to the measure, it was somehow left out as they approved the budget in the wee morning hours of April 1st, conveniently away from the watchful eyes of constituents and the press. Naturally, there was no explanation for the oversight, but instead a commitment that the measure would be addressed in the following weeks. Nine months and several corruption investigations later, there it lies, un-passed and to some degree ignored, like an 800-pound gorilla in the room that everybody pretends not to notice.

While I won't speculate on why they have failed again to follow through, I do encourage you to research these issues and decide for yourself if they would make for an effective

deterrent to lawmaker corruption. Like me, I think you'll agree that they do.

Unfortunately, the facts about legislative corruption speak for themselves and highlight the need for aggressive action. There have been 42 state legislators accused of misdeeds in just the last 12 years alone. Many have resigned, some have been convicted and still, leadership term limits and pension-stripping measures gain little traction.

My friends, I won't sugarcoat it. It's unquestionably disappointing but we simply cannot let cynicism set in again. We've come too far. Citizen to citizen, I ask for your help in demanding accountability. There is simply no other way to get them to acknowledge the 800 pound gorilla in the room.