



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Andrea Stewart-Cousins

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ANDREA STEWART-COUSINS January 6, 2021

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"Thank you, Mr. President.

Thank you, Senator Gianaris, for your kind words and all the work you have done on behalf of the Conference. And thank you to my amazing colleagues for allowing me to continue in this historic role.

Thank you to Governor Cuomo for your leadership during this pandemic, and I look forward to continuing to work in partnership to tackle the challenges before us.

I also want to thank my friend and partner in the Assembly, Speaker Carl Heastie.

Thank you to Minority Leader Rob Ortt. I look forward to working with you and your conference.

Today, I'm proud to begin this year with 43 members in the Democratic Majority who represent communities from Buffalo, Syracuse, Rochester, the Capital Region, the Mohawk and Hudson Valleys, Westchester and Rockland Counties, New York City and Long Island.

I am proud to have the first supermajority in modern history and the largest majority ever.

I said in my first remarks as Majority Leader, this chamber must always take the path of creating opportunities rather than the path of putting up barriers.

And the people of New York have overwhelmingly agreed with that path.

This mandate from New Yorkers of all different backgrounds and backyards is an incredible responsibility to deliver . . . one that we stand ready for.

We are excited to welcome seven new members who add to the skills and diversity of this majority:

Welcome Senator Jabari Brisport. Senator Brisport is also a school teacher who is a devoted community activist. I know Jabari is bringing years of work and passion to help his community to this new job and that he will be a fierce representative.

It's wonderful to welcome Senator Reichlin-Melnick, who has moved from the side benches of this chamber, to a well-deserved desk. It is also special to have a member of the Senate family reach this height, and I know that your work as a staffer and as a local official will be great tools in getting the job done.

We welcome Senator Michelle Hinchey who will be representing the 46th District that stretches from Ulster County to Montgomery County. While Michelle is the daughter of the late and beloved Congressman Maurice Hinchey, we are excited for the new generation of leadership she brings to the Senate and her passion for helping Upstate communities thrive.

And Senator John Mannion. Senator Mannion had to run what seemed like a race that would never have a finish line -- but you are here -- and we are thrilled to have you bringing your experience as a high school teacher and union leader to this chamber.

I'm also excited to welcome Senator Samra Brouk, the daughter of an Ethiopian immigrant who was born and raised in the community she will now be representing. I'm excited for you to bring your life experiences from the Peace Corps to helping build more environmentally sustainable communities to this body.

I want to welcome Senator Jeremy Cooney. It's incredible to imagine that Senator Cooney was born in an Indian orphanage, and today sits here representing parts of the great City of Rochester. Senator Cooney has dedicated his career to public service, and I know that this is the start of a new and successful chapter.

Last but not least, Senator Sean Ryan. Many of you already know Senator Ryan from his work in the Assembly since 2011 fighting for the economic well-being of Buffalo and Western New York. Welcome, Senator Ryan and I look forward to your ongoing leadership.

This day, the kickoff to a 2-year term, is always a day filled with hope and promise. Usually, the Chamber would be buzzing with activity, the hallways filled with smiling faces.

This year, as we all know, is different. But while we don't have the crowds in the gallery or our friends and family roaming the hallways...We are still holding on to that hope and promise.

I think everyone understands that the last year has been extremely challenging for all of us. We have seen the Covid Pandemic ravage our communities, our state, our nation and the world.

It is chilling to think about what all of us have been through in the last 10 months.

Here in New York, tens of thousands of our family members, friends, colleagues and constituents have died.

Businesses have closed, jobs have been lost and people are hurting.

We are a changed state, and we are changed nation.

But Mr. President, there is hope and promise on the horizon. Vaccines have begun to be distributed, a new President that we can trust to help New York, not hurt us, will soon take office.

And we get to say goodbye to Mitch! Because we won Georgia! And my good Friend, Chuck Schumer will be Majority Leader....and Chuck we need you!

And today, despite the seditious actions of a few extremists, we are confident Congress will do its job and allow the Government to get back to work.

We need a functional, effective federal government if we're going to climb out of the economic and health crises New York faces. All of us understand that.

But we in the Senate also have our part to play, and we have shown and will continue to show that we are ready to push a bold, progressive agenda to meet the challenges of our times.

I think back to that March night when we came back into session to provide immediate funding to fight this pandemic. It was the first time as Majority Leader that I called us back into session after gaveling out.

No one could imagine that horror we would see over the next few months.

More than 1 million New Yorkers infected and more than 30,000 who have lost their lives to this pandemic.

But despite these overwhelming conditions, the members of this chamber stepped up time and time again to help the people of our state make it through this unprecedented catastrophe.

In the earliest days of the pandemic, Senators took on responsibilities none of them likely ever imagined as part of their jobs when they took office.

They secured refrigerated trucks for local hospitals, set up massive food banks for constituents, checked on people stuck in quarantine, held Zoom town halls, fought to get an unprecedented number of unemployment claims approved and delivered PPE to our frontline workers.

And as our members stepped up in their communities, they also stepped up in the halls of government. As a body, we held hearings on the effects of Covid on our workforce, hospitals, nursing homes, and schools.

We passed legislation providing help for small businesses struggling, for workers that need help and for our frontline responders who were desperate for resources.

We passed laws to make sure our democracy continued to function and voting would be accessible and safe for everyone.

Just last week we enacted the strongest eviction moratoriums in the nation while at the same time helping homeowners, small landlords and our seniors—we need to do the same for our small businesses too, and we will.

I said in my first remarks as Majority Leader, always take the path of creating opportunities rather than the path of putting up barriers.

We need look no further than Washington over the past four years to see what devastation can occur when a government chooses the latter path.

But here in New York, this Senate – working with our partners in government – has shown what we can do when we take the path of creating opportunities.

We strengthened voting rights and passed campaign finance reform.

We made sure that New York's laws recognize that women's rights are human rights.

We stood up for our LGBTQ community.

We stood up for our immigrant brothers and sisters.

We stood up for victims of abuse and harassment.

We stood up for tenants and homeowners.

We stood up for black and brown New Yorkers who have disproportionately suffered because of inequities in policing and our criminal justice system.

We stood up for victims of gun violence who have been ignored by Washington for decades.

We did all this while battling a horrific pandemic that has devastated our communities, our economy and our way of life.

And now, as we begin a new year and a new Legislative Session, we have more work to do and more opportunities to create.

Our state's finances are in desperate shape and we have a budget deficit to tackle. We are up to the task, and we can do it without moving toward austerity or balancing our budget on the backs of working families.

We need to get serious about making sure that everyone shares the burden. We need to ask more of the millionaires and billionaires who have gotten even richer during this pandemic.

We need to create new revenue streams by legalizing mobile sports betting and marijuana.

But even with these measures, our economy cannot fully recover until we put the COVID-19 crisis beyond us once and for all.

We must continue to improve our testing capacity and speed while ensuring that our vaccination rollout reaches as many New Yorkers as possible, as fast as possible.

We need to help small businesses stay open and, as we did with tenants, protect those that have lost revenue due to COVID from eviction.

And while we fix our economy, we must continue improving our democracy, which is at the heart of everything else we do.

Universal mail-in voting and early voting helped bring record numbers of New Yorkers out to vote in November. While we celebrate this historic turnout we must also fix the problems that led to long lines and weeks of vote counting that left our elections unresolved long after the rest of the country's were over.

And finally, we must continue to, as Dr. King – who we will celebrate later this month – might say, help bend the arc of the moral universe toward justice.

That means that the Senate will continue to look for ways to tear down barriers and create new opportunities for the marginalized, persecuted, and disenfranchised – and to combat systemic inequality that has only gotten worse during the pandemic.

This is a bold mandate, and a daunting list of priorities to take on. But bold action is what the times require, and what the people who sent us here demand.

And from everything I've seen from my colleagues in this chamber over the past year, I know that – working together – we are up to the challenge.

Thank you, Mr. President."