

NEW YORK STATE SENATE

DEMOCRATIC CONFERENCE

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History Made: Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins Opens 2019 Senate Session As First Woman To Ever Lead New York State Legislative Chamber

First, I want to thank God—Because I consider myself being here an amazing grace for which I am eternally humbled and grateful for the opportunity.

Thank you Madame President. It has been such a pleasure to work with you in your role as Lt. Governor.

Thank you Senator Gianaris for the kind words and for all the work you have done on behalf of our conference.

Thank you Senator Griffo. I know this year will be a very good one. And I know we will work well together.

Thank you Governor Cuomo for being here. This has been a wild ride and I look forward to working with you on our shared agenda for New York.

Thank you Comptroller DiNapoli, for all you have done and continue to do for New York.

Thank you Speaker Heastie. I look forward to us being legislative partners and working together to deliver the government that New York has demanded.

I have to say I stand here in awe. In awe of everything that has happened.

I look out at my Conference! 39 members strong! We have 15 new members of the Conference.

We have 14 women in the Conference and in this Chamber, 20 women!

Think about it, it wasn't that long ago that women weren't even allowed to set foot on this Senate Floor. Let's have all the women senators stand up! Look at us now, Amazing!

I told you have 15 new members let me take a moment to introduce you to some of my new colleagues. And bear with me, gladly this list is a little long.

Alessandra Biaggi has already earned a reputation as a fierce advocate for women's rights and fighting against sexual harassment. I look forward to her serving as the Senate's Ethics Committee Chair and working to clean up Albany and rebuild the voters' trust.

I am excited to welcome Jim Gaughran, and know that his decades of experience in the public sector will be vital as Chair of the Committee on Local Government.

I am inspired by Andrew Goundardes' life of public service and his commitment to providing a stronger voice for the residents of Brooklyn is outstanding.

I welcome Pete Harekham's experience in public office and look forward to working with him as a fellow Westchester County representative.

I am honored to welcome the first Muslim State Senator, Robert Jackson. Robert is a powerful advocate for education fairness and we are lucky to have him in the State Senate.

Join me in welcoming Senator Kaplan, the first Iranian-American elected to the State Senate. Anna will continue her service to Nassau County families and will work tirelessly to help grow the Long Island and New York economy.

I'm excited to welcome Senator Liu as the first Chinese-American elected to the State Senate. John has a depth of knowledge and experience that will benefit his constituents and ALL New Yorkers.

Suffolk County's Senator Monica Martinez, the first Salvadorian Senator. She has dedicated her life to public service, is a wonderful addition to this body and I know she will fight hard for Long Island families.

I look forward to working with Senator Rachel May who will be chairing the Aging Committee. I know she will work diligently to serve our senior citizens and represent upstate families and communities.

I am excited to welcome Senator Metzger from the Hudson Valley who, as chair of the Senate Agriculture Committee, will help our farmers and agribusinesses grow and prosper while also protecting our environment and natural resources.

Senator Zellnor Myrie, the first Costa Rican Senator. He understands the affordable housing crisis facing too many New Yorkers. Additionally, as Elections Committee Chair, he will move our state forward to empower voters and cut red tape.

I am proud to welcome Senator Jessica Ramos who has strong roots in her community and I know that her leadership, especially as Labor Chair, will be crucial to our progress and success.

Senator Julia Salazar's activism in civil rights and immigration will be important as we address many crucial issues facing New Yorkers and she will be a fierce advocate for her district.

Both of these women are the first Columbian Senators in the State Senate.

Senator James Skoufis is willing and eager to stand up and fight powerful interests and corrupt politics here in Albany. He has already proven to be a great representative for the Hudson Valley, and he will keep delivering real results for his communities.

As the first Indian-American Senator, Kevin Thomas has made history and joins his colleagues in a diverse and truly representative Senate Democratic Majority. His experience fighting for the less fortunate and ensuring fairness and opportunities will make him a truly exceptional Senator for Long Island and all of New York State.

I also thank all my returning members, who have been extraordinary and have been critical in this quest. Thank you.

And of course I want to welcome our new colleagues from across the aisle Daphne Jordan and Bob Antonacci. I know we will work together well to serve all of New York.

What a list!

As I reflect on what this day means, I think of opportunities and barriers. I think of all the giants whose names we know, Sojourner, Harriet, Susan and Eleanor, to name just a few, whose sacrifices have made this moment possible.

I also think about the giants of my life.

I think about my parents, Beryl and Bob. My father was a World War II hero who served in a segregated Army...won medals for his country and his valor and then came back home and was denied so many things, even the GI Bill, because of the color of his skin.

I think of my mother, a woman who because of her gender and her race was not given a fair shot. She always wanted to be a lawyer, but that opportunity was closed to her. She typed 100 words a minute but again was denied the opportunity to work for any corporation or private business so she entered the workforce through civil service and made her mark in New York City government.

I think of my brother, a Vietnam veteran and all he has accomplished and all the support he has given me through the years.

I think of my late husband Tom, and all the sacrifices he made so I would have the opportunities I have today. I wish he was here with me, seeing all he helped accomplish.

Now I look at my children, Candice, Kevin and Steven and their families and I think of all the sacrifices they have made, all they have done for me. I know I would not be here without them.

Since our nation's founding, those chosen by the people to lead our government have faced the choice of traveling down two paths: the path of putting up barriers, or the path of creating opportunities.

We know all too well which path some of today's leaders have chosen.

We need only look at Washington, where the administration has embraced the path of putting up barriers to the extreme – that has literally shut down the federal government to “build a wall.”

But not all barriers are that obvious. Sometimes, even in seemingly progressive places like New York, barriers exist.

We are going to break down those barriers!

We are going to tell the rest of the country that New York is about opportunities! Not barriers, not walls, not divisions.

And how are we going to tell them? We are going to make our democracy work.

We are going to implement early voting, combat voter suppression, make registering to vote easier and allow voting by mail.

We are finally going to give New Yorkers the honest, functional, ethical government they deserve.

We will restore the public's trust by closing the LLC loophole, reforming our campaign finance system, making sure state contracts are fully vetted, and shining a light on how government works.

We are going to continue to build our economy and create more jobs. We are going to stop the exodus from our state and we are going to make sure ALL of New York – Upstate and downstate; urban, suburban, and rural - grows economically.

While our national government vindictively uses the tax laws to punish our state, we are going to lower our tax burden for middle class New Yorkers and make the tax cap permanent.

We are going to reduce mandates on local governments. And we are going to help our small businesses including MWBE's thrive.

We are going to make sure that New York's laws recognize that women's rights are human rights. We will pass the Reproductive Health Act and the Comprehensive Contraceptive Care Act.

I stand here the first woman leader of a legislative house in state history-And if we do this right, I cannot and will not be the last. And let my voice be clear: we need to deal with the scourge of sexual harassment in the workplace. We cannot let this moment and this movement pass and we will hold hearings and hold all accountable.

We will stand up for our LGBTQ community and pass real protections including GENDA.

We will stand up for our immigrant brothers and sisters and make sure that their rights are respected and protected. This is New York after all!

We will make sure our children and every New Yorker has access to quality, affordable health care.

We will make sure all New York children have access to the quality education they deserve and that all our children have access to quality, affordable higher education.

We are going to pass the Dream Act and we are going to name it after our former colleague Jose Peralta, who championed this bill.

We will stand up for victims of child sexual abuse and finally pass the Child Victims Act.

We will protect tenants and ensure that we provide affordable housing throughout New York.

We are going to reform our criminal justice system and pass bail reform, speedy trial and ensure our system treats everyone equally.

We will lead the way on keeping our families safe from gun violence.

We will keep guns out of the hands of dangerous individuals, fix our flawed background check process, pass safe storage legislation, and ban bump stocks.

We will have bold investments in our infrastructure, which has been neglected for too long. That means restoring the MTA to an international transit model and improving roads, bridges, and tunnels across our great state.

And we believe in science and understand the dangers of climate change. We are going to work together to protect our environment.

Colleagues, this is just part of an ambitious agenda. There is nothing to stop us and there is so much more that we have to accomplish. But we were sent here to be ambitious, to make New York a beacon of hope and progress for the rest of our country.

As I said at the beginning, our leaders have always been at a crossroads as Senators, New Yorkers, and as Americans. We can choose the path of putting up barriers, or we can choose the path of creating opportunities. By delivering this diverse, talented, and historic group of Senators to Albany – the people of our great state have made it crystal clear which path they expect us to take.

So as I address my colleagues on both sides of the aisle, from every corner of New York, I invite you to join the fight to create opportunities for every New Yorker, a level playing field for every child, and a state as great as the people who live in it.

Thank You!

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