

Rep. Jil Tracy Newsletter

December 11, 2009

Rep. Tracy: The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same

One year ago this week, Illinois residents began their morning with news of former Governor Blagojevich's arrest on a litany of corruption charges, including extreme pay to play politics and trying to sell President Obama's former Senate seat. On that cold Tuesday morning via the national news, Illinoisans were shocked to hear U.S. Prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald's statements that the ex Governor's activities were a corruption crime spree that would make our revered President Lincoln roll over in his grave.

Only two months later, General Assembly members impeached and removed Rod Blagojevich from office, with the promise that Illinois state government was going to get a top to bottom ethical scrubbing over the next year. Newly installed Governor Pat Quinn took the helm, and the cloud of conflict that had hovered over the state capitol for the previous six years seemed to disappear. Legislators were eager to work with a governor who would work directly with the General Assembly, restore trust and who would not turn every issue into press availability or political war.

However, as the year wore on, it became evident the mess left by Blagojevich was worse than most expected and Gov. Quinn had his work cut out for him. For me the end of the honeymoon period was the day of Gov. Quinn's long awaited budget address. The budget had been crafted by the former administration's same budget person and contained the same irresponsible increased spending, fund sweeps and non-payment of pension obligations. Worse yet, on top of increased spending, the budget called for an income tax increase on individuals and businesses. I had also hoped the new administration would act swiftly in halting some of the former administration's new programs, policies and personnel that appeared to have greatly contributed to the State's increasing financial woes.

The budget fiasco worsened in the weeks to follow. One day we were told the budget deficit was \$4 billion dollars and the next week it had jumped to over \$10 billion. Sadly, Gov. Quinn then pulled a page out of his predecessor's play book by threatening to make 50% cuts to the programs that serve the state's most vulnerable citizens if legislators didn't accept his budget plan which included a 50% tax increase. Predictably, nothing was accomplished and we were left with another unbalanced spending plan that did little more than force us to borrow and add to our mounting deficit.

We had the opportunity and public support to clean up our State's ways of doing business as usual. We were encouraged when Gov. Quinn appointed the Illinois Reform Commission, consisting of former prosecutors and good government groups. The commission met day and night for months crafting a plan to rid Illinois government of corruption and remove the stain left by the two previous governors.



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The Reform Commission laid out proposals for a number of changes to Illinois politics. Some of the more notable ideas produced by the commission called for redistricting reform, moving the primary election date later in the year, term limits for legislative leaders, campaign contribution caps mirroring federal levels, and provisions that would require legislation to be voted upon if the proposal garners enough sponsors.

Every single one of these ideas was formed into legislation and sponsored by a state legislator; however very few were ever allowed to be discussed and debated on the House floor. The only reform piece of legislation to make it to a vote was an incomplete Recall measure that included only the office of Governor and sham campaign finance reform that does nothing to reduce the influence of money in state politics (more on this below).

In my view, the highlights of the first year of Gov. Quinn's administration is that he certainly was more accessible and easier to work with than the ex-Gov. Blagojevich. However, our State needs so much more to lead the 5th most populous state in the nation back to a state of fiscal responsibility and economic prosperity. Our structural deficit has continued to climb by the billions. We have a backlog of nearly \$5 billion in unpaid bills, pension debt is astronomical, excessive borrowing has become all too common place, unemployment remains above the national average, Illinois citizens are begging for stricter ethical reforms and the only solutions being offered are more tax hikes and bigger government. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Campaign Finance Proposal Leaves Large Loophole

There were several bill attempts in the House and Senate to address campaign finance reform. The impeachment hearings and reform commission highlighted the role of money via campaign contributions as the root of much corruption. However, in the end, the Democrat controlled legislature and Governor decided to act in their self interest by passing another watered-down campaign finance reform proposal that does little more than further concentrate power into the hands of a select few legislative leaders. Senate Bill 1466, was a measure that caps campaign contributions for individuals, corporations, unions and political action committees. However, there was something obviously missing from this ethics reform, caps for state parties and legislative leaders.

Earlier, in the year, Gov. Quinn had vetoed a flawed first attempt at campaign finance regulations which led to optimism that serious changes to reducing the influence of money in Illinois politics could still be accomplished in the wake of the year's corruption revelations. But, when the second flawed bill was presented to the Governor, he chose to sign it on the very same day Blagojevich was arrested.

Speaker Madigan and Senate President Cullerton retain a tight grip on their respective caucuses through their sizeable campaign accounts. The Speaker is able to dole out unlimited campaign contributions to his members in order to hold onto their seats. In return for the favorable contributions, those individual legislators vote in lock step with the Speaker. The opposite also holds true. If a member breaks rank they could face retribution when those same large donations go to an opponent. In essence, rank-and-file legislators can become more accountable to their leaders than the constituents they were elected to represent.

I encourage to look at the Illinois State Board of Elections website <http://www.elections.state.il.us/>. There you will see just how much money candidates receive from state parties, legislative leaders and special interests. The amounts of money spent in these elections and the source of contributor is an eye opener.

As We Approach the New Year

Our State is severely cash strapped. It is going to be a very difficult next year for those who work with State government or depend on its services. After hearing from many who work in State government and with government services, I still believe there is much wasteful government spending and duplication of services. Rooting out this waste and duplication is key to restoring any sense of fiscal well being in the State. I will continue to push for reform in this area and in the way Illinois elects its officials and does business.

Merry Christmas, happy holidays and may we work towards a more peaceful New Year as a nation Under God.

If there are further questions regarding these new measures or other recently enacted laws please contact Representative Tracy's district office at (217) 223-0833.

Sincerely,

Rep. Jil Tracy