



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Daniel L. Squadron

An Update From Senator Squadron

DANIEL L. SQUADRON

Dear Friend:

With so much happening in Albany, I wanted to send along an update.

Over the last week and a half, I'm sure you have joined the rest of the state in looking on with horror and fascination as the State Senate has collapsed. A partially aborted attempt by two of my Democratic colleagues to enter into a pact with the Republicans has led to deadlock...and absurdity. For a period last week, the most significant question circling the capitol was, who holds the keys to the Senate chamber? The absurd truth is that control of the upper legislative house in the third largest state in the nation seemed for a period to hinge on an actual hinge.

There are lots of reasons we are in this mess. For one, it's important to remember there are many who have been desperate to freeze action on important progressive goals from housing to jobs to ethics and campaign finance.

But things have gotten so bad so quickly for a simple reason. In the State Senate, the person, or people, who lay claim to the title of Temporary President and Majority Leader hold all the

power. You are not witnessing a simple battle over titles or committee chairs. Rather you are witnessing a fight built on the question of who controls:

- All of the millions of dollars of internal Senate resources (staff, district mailings, member “lulu” stipends...even paper clips)
- All of the tens of millions of dollars of legislative grants and capital investment dollars
- All – that’s right all – of the legislation that moves through the house (in effect giving the leader of the Senate a non-overrideable veto on all legislative matters in the State of New York)
- All other things you can imagine, except who gets elected to this body

New Yorkers are watching a woefully undemocratic process unfold because this is a battle for control of a woefully undemocratic place. After having been elected by the people, each legislator holds one powerful card – the vote for leader. In a sixty-two-member body in which members are so evenly divided between parties – and all sixty-two of us, not to mention advocates, lobbyists and special interests, understand the stakes – desperation, chaos, and stalemate are all too likely.

The only way out of this mess, assuming neither party suddenly gains a large majority, is for the entire body to enact real reform that fundamentally changes the power dynamic.

In the short-term, we need a bipartisan operating agreement that leaves the question of leadership aside while letting us pass the legislation that is so important for our city and our state. We cannot let the madness overwhelm the fact that the issues we fight for and the laws we pass have a profound effect on our constituents.

The proposal put forward by the Democratic Conference, modeled on what other states have done, is a fair way to get us back to the business of legislating, or at least a place to start the

conversation. (On the other hand, the "proposal" put forward by the Republican Conference would give Pedro Espada and Dean Skelos absolute power and includes the insane idea that Senator Espada has two votes.)

Of course, whatever solution we come to now won't get all of the legislation I'm fighting for passed or solve all of the Senate's problems -- and there are a lot of them. Real long-term reform is necessary; we need substantive changes on ethics, campaign finance and internal rules. This year we started to move the ball on each, but we have not done nearly enough. Beyond just getting support for ethics reform, which I was pleased to do, we have to enact it. Beyond just introducing campaign finance bills, we have to pass them into law. And beyond rules reform at the margins (or what the "coup" served up, which is a cynical attempt at headlines that masks leader-controlled business-as-usual), we need to fundamentally change the way the Senate is organized: if we had a real way to move bills to the floor, non-partisan administration of the Senate, and a fairer balance of power between the leader and the members, this sort of nuclear stalemate would be very, very unlikely.

New Yorkers are witnessing a fight over choosing a leader who will have near-absolute power, not just on a \$130 billion budget but on issues from healthcare to the environment, housing to farming to civil rights. If there is any lesson from this standoff, it is that reform is not about idealism or feeling nice. It is about democracy, at its most basic core. Without democracy, the rot emanating from the Senate Chamber won't stop in Albany; it is sure to spread, via bad laws and poor policy, across the state from Western New York to the eastern tip of Long Island.

I wish I could offer a prediction about what happens next; but the last week and a half has been so unpredictable, I'm convinced predictions are impossible. (A week and a half ago I would have bet that this week we would pass my ethics reform legislation, my housing, education and pedestrian safety proposals, and a raft of other bills I carry.)

As always, please let me know if you have any thoughts, suggestions -- or predictions. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Best,

Daniel

Daniel Squadron

State Senator

25th Senate District

P.S. If you're interested in another perspective, in Tuesday's Daily News Michael Daly wrote about the chaos -- and discussed some of my pre-coup work as Chair of the Cities Committee:

http://www.nydailynews.com/news/2009/06/16/2009-0616_inept_albany_might_learn_from_chaos.html