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Demand serious change from next Assembly speaker

By JOSHUA SPIVAK

While the downfall of longtime Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver may have shaken New York State's Government, it is not clear whether we will witness any serious change. But what should be obvious is that NY voters need to demand that their representatives push to enact serious changes to the calcified chamber. After all, if the indictment of the assembly leader doesn't provoke change in the "three men in a room" culture that has led to numerous corruption investigations, it is hard to see that anything can improve the legislative workings in Albany. On the plus side, just the fact that Silver left may be a sign that reform could happen.

Unfortunately, New York State has been down this road before and the results were not promising. One of Silver's predecessors, Mel Miller, lost his Speakership, his assembly seat and his freedom after being convicted of fraud (which was later overturned on appeal) in 1991. Two other past speakers, Perry Duryea and Stanley Steingut, were both indicted in the 1970s. Silver's longtime counterpart in the Senate, Majority Leader Joseph Bruno, left office in 2008, and then was convicted of honest services fraud (the conviction was also overturned on appeal). Senate Majority Leader Pedro Espada Jr., who briefly served during a time of upheaval in the Senate, also ended his tenure with an indictment and later conviction. Needless to say, none of these embarrassing charges brought any real change to the state legislature.

For decades, both houses of the New York State's legislature have failed to operate as anything but a one-man show. For New York voters, the entire value of electing a group of diverse individuals with different points of view and some presumed individual talents was lost as all power was essentially turned over to one man in each chamber. Alternative points of view have been ignored and suppressed, and the two leaders effectively rule by fiat and honest graft — handing out money and perks to favored caucus members in order to keep them in line. It seems impossible to believe that most of the legislators themselves are thrilled that after fighting to win their seats, they are left with a shrunken, almost non-existent role in actual decision-making.

The beneficiaries of this legislative farce are the leaders and, perhaps not surprisingly, the Governor's office. Thanks to the leaders being given all the power of the chamber, the Governor only has to deal with one man in each chamber, which makes legislative horse trading much easier. It is no surprise then that most of the Governors of recent vintage have avoided getting too entangled in legislative politics and have been content to leave well enough alone.

Over the years, the minority parties in both chambers have highlighted the negative effects of the one-man rule. The Democrats in the State Senate once compiled a list of the numerous errors that appeared in bills that were written without any input or amendments. Their research was ignored.

But there is at least some hope that this could change. If we look back at Speaker Mel Miller's indictment, we see that Miller served as Speaker for a full year after his indictment and only left because his conviction led to an automatic expulsion. Neither Duryea nor Steingut were forced out. But Silver held on for less than two weeks. It wasn't bravery or a change in ethical mindset that led to the quick hook. In fact, the leaders of the Assembly first tried to create a workaround, where Silver would only step aside temporarily. It was simply the knowledge that

the individual Assembly members would be pilloried for supporting an allegedly corrupt leader that led to the change of positions. Maybe similar bravery will extend to changing the way the legislature operates.

It is time that the public-at-large throws their own hat into this ring and demand that their own elected officials demand serious improvements in the Assembly by its next leader. Otherwise, we're sure to see the continuation of a useless legislative body, followed by an almost certain high placed indictments in the years to come.

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