Now, fix New York’s Legislature:
Albany is still a boss-driven ‘democracy’
by SEYMOUR P. LACHMAN

On April 1, this year’s New York State $175.5 billion budget was adopted by the state Legislature. The budget included many significant provisions that will impact on the lives of all New Yorkers. One of the most important items included long-overdue improvements in the criminal justice system.

In some ways this event differed from my experience as a member of the state Senate, where the budget was consistently late, necessitating much uncertainty and the need for continuing resolutions. However, much of the process remained the same.

The budget was adopted in the middle of the night, when legislators were presented with massive documents. They had little time to read, let alone analyze its contents, which had been crafted by the now “three people in a room.” (If the budget had been adopted later, legislators would have lost their deserved salary increase. The $79,500 had been in place a generation ago when I was in Albany.)

The process is such that members who were on the floor could not offer any amendments to the document.

Furthermore, the urgent issue of campaign finance reform was not directly tackled and was put off and placed in the hands of a still non-existent committee whose members would be selected by the two legislative leaders and the governor sometime in the future.

This is one example of how the speaker of the Assembly, the Senate majority leader and the governor control the important issues facing the state. While it is true that the “three people in a room” are now more diverse, and include an African-American woman and an African-American man, the process remains fundamentally the same.

I believe that in order to better serve the needs of New Yorkers, a more democratic legislative structure must be established. More power in decision making must be transferred from the near-total control of the legislative leadership and returned to the individual elected legislators. We need structural reform that is in line with what many other states have put in place.

When I entered the Senate in 1996, I was dismayed by the powerlessness of most legislators. I remember quite vividly while the budget was being prepared behind closed doors by the then-governor and the legislative leaders, some of my colleagues read their local newspapers. Others were planning their district summer events. One was invariably outside the legislative chamber making calls to constituents to wish them a happy birthday or happy anniversary. A few were asking people to contribute to community events that were being planned.
The two houses of the Legislature must work to give more power to the average legislator. When I served in the Senate, every bill that was passed had to have the support of the leader. Leaders also had the power to appoint committee chairs and set the stipends for these positions. Redistricting, which is crucial for ensuring proper representation, is ultimately controlled by the leaders. A truly politically independent board for both state and congressional districts is called for. Resources in terms of staff, space and funding for district offices must be distributed more equitably

I believe the time is ripe for change. Transparency of process and outcomes and a change in the power relationship has the potential for enhancing the quality of decision making. If the average legislator has greater influence the needs of the citizens of the state rather than the lobbyists will be better served.

In the last few years we have witnessed the unfortunate result of how power impacted on leaders. It is time to shift the power balance back to all the elected legislators to benefit the people of New York.

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