

N.Y. senators may only act to save their districts

THE ISSUE | The stalemate in the state Senate.
OUR OPINION | The “people’s business” is put on hold while senators play a power struggle game.

Who’s going to blink first in the state Senate, the Democrats or the Republicans?

They’re locked in a stare-down, like bug-eyed kids standing toe-to-toe hoping one side will flinch, lose and taste defeat.

But this is no kids’ game these senators are playing, although the antics are childish. They’re elected officials fighting for political power to benefit their own careers and strengthen the party that supports them. It is the most intense and selfish war of partisan politics ever seen in Albany.

It has become obvious that the constituency, the people the senators are supposed to serve first and foremost, are inconsequential in this battle. They are the collateral damage.

The interests of the constituency does not matter, even though senators in both parties have declared they are there to do the “people’s business.”

Baloney. The Republican coup on June 8, the retreat of one of the Democratic turncoats, the lawsuit by deposed Senate Majority Leader Malcolm Smith and all the rest that has caused the Senate to fall into gridlock had nothing to do with the “people’s business.” It was all about the “politicians’ business.” To suggest otherwise is an insult to us, “the people.”

The Senate has now been

“out of business” for 10 days, paralyzed in a stalemate where both sides have 31 members. Both Democrats and Republicans claimed victory in a court decision this week that declared no side the winner and neither party is willing to legislate unless the other recognizes its leadership.

Both sides are stubbornly dug in deep and unwilling to compromise. In the meantime, the “people’s business” sits and waits.

Left undone are dozens of requests from counties to continue their authority over local sales taxes, which expire July 1. If action isn’t taken, counties face large revenue losses that will result in higher property taxes and reduced services. Other big issues now in limbo include gay marriage, property tax caps, the bottle bill, reforms to the public pension fund and reissuing property tax rebate checks.

Sen. George Winner, R-Elmira, said he’s confident senators under pressure to act on bills that directly affect their districts will eventually get back to work in the final days of this session.

Maybe. But we’re convinced that if a quorum returns to the Senate chambers that only the minimal amount of work will be done. In other words, senators will act only enough to save face in their districts, and nothing else. And that’s being optimistic.

NATIONAL VIEW | CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Hope and experience

There was a phrase that popped to mind Monday as President Barack Obama outlined his ambitious health-care reform plans. He told a room full of doctors at the American Medical Association convention in Chicago that Americans pay too much for and get too little from health care. That the system is a “ticking time bomb” in the federal budget. That his reforms – including a controversial new government health insurance program – will improve care and curb costs.

The phrase that came to mind? “The triumph of hope over experience.”

That’s the only way to describe Obama and congressional Democrats’ campaign for a so-called “public option” as part of health-care reform.

What it means is another government-run health insurance plan to compete with private health insurers.

The president backs such a plan to keep the private insurers “honest” and promote competition. He promises that anyone who wants to keep their private coverage will be able to do so.

There’s a lot of theorizing about what such a government-run plan would look like and how it would affect private insurers. We can’t know for sure until we see a proposal with details.

But we do know a few things about government-run health plans. We draw upon decades of experience with Medicare, the government’s plan for the elderly, and Medicaid, which provides coverage for the poor.

We know those plans pay bare-bones rates and yet still are busting the federal budget. One part of Medicare will be insolvent in 2018 if nothing is done. States are staggering under Medicaid costs. We know, as the president said in

his AMA speech, Medicare and Medicaid spending will “grow over the coming decades by an amount almost equal to the amount our government currently spends on our nation’s defense.” And that “it will eventually grow larger than what our government spends on anything else today.”

That’s scary. Costs clearly need to be controlled. But the Democrats’ solution to all this government excess is to create ... another government-run health plan.

In what parallel universe can that possibly work to hold down costs? Where’s the proof that government can run an efficient, cost-effective system without raiding the Treasury for more and more funding? Where’s the proof that government can curb billions in fraud and waste that plague Medicare and Medicaid, not to mention the intense political battles and arcane rules entangling decisions about how doctors and hospitals are paid?

We’re not arguing that health insurers couldn’t improve. Or that they couldn’t use more competition to drive costs down and quality up.

But the federal government isn’t competition. It is the health care equivalent of Bigfoot, with so many Americans on its rolls that it dictates prices for doctors, drugs, and other benefits. It sets low prices, to be sure, lower than many insurers are able to match. But that just means those doctors and hospitals recoup the losses by shifting costs onto those with private insurance – amounting to an estimated \$89 billion a year, one insurance exec told a Senate committee a few months ago.

A new public option may start small. But it could easily crowd out private plans depending on how premiums, benefits and subsidies are structured.

ARTIST’S VIEW



GUEST COMMENTARY | LAURA M. OPELT

Redefining poverty in a time of economic turmoil

The global recession has many of us facing the toughest financial challenges of our lives. It’s a time for profound questions, especially if you, or someone you know, is a recent casualty of our current toxic economic climate.

If you’ve been laid off in the past couple of months and don’t know where to turn; if you’ve fallen behind on your mortgage payments; if you’re worried that you won’t be able to pay your electric bill or are just struggling to make ends meet; you’re part of a growing subculture within Steuben County.

You’re not alone. And our response, quite simply, is “welcome, neighbor.”

Catholic Charities of Steuben County, like many other local social service providers, is seeing a lot of new faces among the people that come to us for help in meeting their daily living needs. In the past, we’ve provided the necessary footholds for those who consistently earn low incomes and struggle to attain the long-term stability that so many of us take for granted. The core ele-

ment of our mission is to give help and hope to everyone who needs it.

These are different times, however. The recession is “defining down” what it means to be poor in Steuben County. More and more people are finding themselves without the resources they need to get by.

Here’s what we mean: by our estimates more than 13,000 of the 98,000-plus people in Steuben County are currently living below the federal government poverty guidelines. That number is almost certain to increase as the full force of recession takes hold in our area and unemployment figures continue to rise.

The “newly poor” may come from a variety of job sectors such as manufacturing, service industries, or self-employed contracting. But the one thing they have in common is that they’re now without regular work and health care insurance; many for the first time in their lives.

Since it’s unlikely that our local economy will get dramatically better any time soon, we want to encourage anyone going through a hard time to take

that important first step and reach out for assistance from groups like Catholic Charities’ Turning Point Center right here in Corning. Or, dial the 2-1-1 Helpline for confidential help on a host of issues related to the economic downturn.

We understand how frustrating it is when the job market prevents capable people from providing for themselves and their families. We know how hard it is to take the first step through a food-pantry door or to ask for aid in navigating through the New York social service system. But in times like this, it takes courage to ask for help.

Consider it a hand up, not a handout.

And if you reach out, this area’s community service organizations will meet your grasp with a handshake. We’re here for you when you need us.

After all, we’re neighbors.

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Limit money to government

TO THE EDITOR | More money to government is the solution to this economic crisis?

Government cannot properly administer programs they contrived, let alone manage enterprises like GM or AIG! Social Security, Medicaid, Medicare, immigration, education, wars on poverty and drugs follow standard government failure models squandering trillions of dollars. Senator Tom Coburn revealed \$60 billion a year in Medicaid and Medicare fraud exemplifying money to government putrefies purpose and process, cultivating crooked politicians.

Like a magnet, money to government attracts fraud!

Politicians like Barney Frank and Chris Dodd, (Fannie/Freddie) satisfy their appetites, leaving people destitute. Government failures in New Orleans, Detroit, Michigan and California embody incompetent leadership; thoughtless spending, impoverishing our nation.

Elitist intellectual bottom feeders sabotage America, feeding their greed, wasting national treasure. Blind beyond their obese bellies and egos, plunder obscures vision.

People tightening belts during economic crisis, is answered by politician’s hyper gluttony! Unable to get it right on a small scale, like spoiled children politicians want more and bigger toys to break. More money to government expands corruption, incompetence and waste exponentially.

Politicians are exploiting the rich, middle class and especially the poor to arrest power from the people.

With few exceptions, parasitic, partisan, politicians positioning for personal, professional and political profit and power is our government! Effectiveness and efficiency are of no consequence to them. The sign is hung in seats of power, “Politicians Only, Statesmen Need Not Apply.”

More money touching politician’s fingers makes them stickier. Trusting politicians with more reduces trustworthiness. Limiting money to government is the first step to confronting political corruption!

Gerald J Furnkranz
 Millport

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COMMENTARY | JOHN C. BERSIA

Lessons from Iran, Lebanon and N. Korea

In Iran, Lebanon and North Korea, a familiar lesson has played out dramatically in recent days: When freedom reigns, human life has greater importance and security; the opposite prevails under repression.

Why not start with the just-concluded sham election in Iran, a country that once experimented with genuine democratic practices? It is easy to join with the opponents of the declared winner, incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in expressing disgust, although the result should come as no surprise.

Remember, Ahmadinejad originally gained his position through manipulation and fraud. Clearly, he has not changed; the same applies to the Iranian system. Iran’s religious leadership, which was supposedly committed to a free and fair vote this time around, abdicated its responsibility. All the excitement Iranians felt during the robust give-and-take of the campaign was apparently for naught. In the end, the unwillingness of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader, to do what was right meant more than surveys pointing to a likely victory for challenger Mir Hussein Mousavi.

Curiously, some observers are not overly concerned. “Better to have the hardliner you know (Ahmadinejad) than the reformed hardliner (Mousavi) you know less,” they contend. I disagree. Even if Mousavi was once a hardliner and might have been troublesome in his own way, he would have changed the ugly, disruptive tone that has characterized Ahmadinejad’s rule. I suspect many Iranians know what they should do at this stage – take to the streets. Indeed, Mousavi has urged his supporters to resist a government built on lies and dictatorship.

But there is a larger issue here: Elections should not come down to a choice between a hardliner and a reformed hardliner. Voters deserve a full spectrum of options; the only way to ensure that possibility is to topple the religious order that has stifled Iran for three decades.

On to Lebanon, where people crowded the streets after that country’s recent election for a different and uplifting reason: to celebrate voters’ rejection of extremism. And, in sharp contrast to Iran’s experience, the Lebanese had real choices at the ballot box. You would be hard-pressed to find anyone who deems Beirut’s vote less than free or fair. Of course, the encouraging outcome does not guarantee peace and stability for Lebanon, because Hezbollah, a key force on the losing side, retains both influence and guns. It is significant, however, that the majority opted for the mainstream.

Finally, there is North Korea, where the government simply imposes leaders on its people without a second thought. North Koreans will have no say if current ruler Kim Jong Il’s youngest son, Kim Jong Un, succeeds him, as has been reported. They will have no say if he decides to continue his father’s reckless policies that condemn the population to poverty and hunger. And they will have no say if he leads them to war.

Worst of all, North Koreans cannot rise up. They are as helpless as Laura Ling and Euna Lee, the two American journalists recently sentenced to a dozen years of hard labor in North Korea. The only hope for all of them lies in the international community, which has fortunately moved to stand up to Pyongyang’s excesses with new sanctions. In a desperate response, North Korea has announced an all-out effort to obtain nuclear weapons.

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