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Breakaway Democrats in New York Senate Add Another to Their Ranks

By JESSE MCKINLEY JAN. 25, 2017

ALBANY — The Independent Democratic Conference, whose collaboration with Republicans in the State Senate has allowed that party to control the chamber despite being outnumbered by Democrats, added an eighth member on Wednesday.

By recruiting Senator Jose R. Peralta of Queens this week, and two other members in the fall, the conference has evolved from a breakaway group of Democrats into a full-fledged independent faction in the State Senate and the fulcrum of a four-year-old coalition.

The 63-seat Senate now comprises 31 Republicans and 32 Democrats. In addition to the eight Democrats who now belong to the breakway conference, another, Simcha Felder of Brooklyn, caucuses with the Republicans. That leaves the traditional Senate Democratic Conference with just 23 members.

Mr. Peralta's defection does more than siphon power from the Democratic conference; it puts the independent group in position to expand its sphere of influence, pulling Republicans toward the political middle and offering John J. Flanagan, the Senate's Republican leader, an unbreachable bulwark against liberal policies favored by the Democrats who dominate the State Assembly.

Mr. Peralta, whose victory in 2010 made him the first Dominican-American to be elected to the State Senate, said in a statement released by the conference on Wednesday that “today’s political climate demands that progressive legislators take bold action to deliver for their constituents,” adding that he wanted results on issues like affordable housing, homelessness and school funding. “The I.D.C.’s track record on delivering for the most vulnerable New Yorkers is irrefutable,” he said.

The Senate Democratic Conference, led by Senator Andrea Stewart-Cousins of Westchester County, reacted angrily to Mr. Peralta’s move.

“It’s mind-boggling that while on the national level, Democrats are gearing up to resist the Trump administration and its attempts to move the country backwards, we have Democrats here in New York propping up an artificial Republican majority,” said Mike Murphy, a spokesman for Ms. Stewart-Cousins. “We need elected leaders that will put people ahead of personal gain.”

Mr. Murphy’s comments reflected an assertion by liberal Democrats that the independent conference, led by Senator Jeffrey D. Klein, who represents parts of the Bronx and Westchester, is not pursuing progressive causes, but rather is pursuing its members’ personal desire for power.

Mr. Peralta’s decision offered another opportunity for critics to complain about the growing defections to Mr. Klein’s camp even as the administration of President Trump moves aggressively to act on its conservative agenda.

“The way to stand up to Trump’s attacks on our democracy and working families cannot be to empower Republicans in the State Senate whose goals are aligned with the Trump regime,” said Bill Lipton, state director of the Working Families Party, a labor-backed group that has pushed Democrats to embrace liberal policies.

As he has before, Mr. Lipton blamed the rift largely on one man: Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, a Democrat who Mr. Lipton said had not campaigned aggressively enough for other Democrats in November. “This goes back to the governor’s decision to sit on his hands last fall,” he said.

Mr. Cuomo’s representatives have repeatedly answered that charge forcefully by

noting that the governor endorsed Democratic candidates, stumped for them and helped to raise money for the Senate Democratic Conference.

“The Working Families Party is the one that started the exodus from the Democratic Party,” Dani Lever, Mr. Cuomo’s press secretary, said on Wednesday. “And if they want to unite the Democrats, they should lead by example and rejoin the party, because otherwise it’s all hypocrisy.”

Mr. Peralta’s decision may complicate the long-term political calculations of Mr. Cuomo, a centrist who has worked closely with Republicans in the past but has recently announced left-leaning policy proposals seemingly aimed at pleasing the very groups that disdain the independent conference. The moves have fed speculation about the governor’s political future, while drawing attention to the schism among the Senate Democrats.

Mr. Cuomo, known for his savvy and sometimes cudgel-like approach to negotiating, has said he is powerless to make the Senate’s Democratic factions get along.

“They have tensions and personal animus and factions that predate my election that have nothing to do with me,” the governor said in December. “And they’re going to have to work that out themselves.”

But the coalition is probably advantageous to the governor, said Gerald Benjamin, a professor of political science at the State University of New York at New Paltz. “He can organize the elements, and he becomes the unifying force,” Mr. Benjamin said. “He constructs majorities around issues.”

Still, there have been suggestions that Mr. Cuomo’s tactics — including a failed effort to force a special legislative session last month with a potential raise for lawmakers as a lure — are grating on some Democrats. On Monday, Mr. Cuomo met with Assembly Democrats in Albany in a meeting that some participants described as contentious at times.

But Rich Azzopardi, a spokesman for Mr. Cuomo, called the meeting productive. “Any talk that could be characterized as ‘testy’ was centered on the pay raise,” he

said.

One thing seems likely: that Mr. Peralta's move will put added pressure on Ms. Stewart-Cousins to stem the flow of senators to Mr. Klein's camp. In the fall, two other senators — Jesse Hamilton of Brooklyn and Marisol Alcantara of Manhattan — joined the conference, increasing its influence.

All of which raises another question about the balance of power between Ms. Stewart's group and the breakaway conference, which now has a quarter of the Senate's elected Democrats.

“At some point,” Mr. Benjamin said, “you wonder what will become the dominant bloc.”

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