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Unity push intensifies for Democrats groping to run New York Senate

By Joe Mahoney | CNHI State Reporter Aug 24, 2017



ALBANY -- Bickering among Democrats in the state Senate has become virtually a full-contact sport as pressure grows on a renegade group aligned with Republicans to return to the party's mainstream.

Sniping at the eight members of the breakaway Independent Democratic Conference has increased on Twitter and other forums.

Last week, the IDC members were blasted at a rally staged in Manhattan by activists showing support for Senate Democratic leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins, D-Westchester. She had been the target of harsh criticism in a social media post by Daniel Loeb, a billionaire hedge fund manager who has donated heavily to Gov. Andrew Cuomo, Senate Republicans and the IDC Democrats.

In a Facebook posting he later deleted, Loeb, citing the senator's support for teachers' unions, argued that Stewart-Cousins, the first African-American woman to lead a conference of New York lawmakers, has "done more damage to people of color than anyone who has ever donned a hood."

The comments were swiftly criticized by a Cuomo spokesman, and Loeb issued a public apology to Stewart-Cousins for making the inflammatory assertion.

Meanwhile, some progressive Democrats are saying that Cuomo has failed to use his clout to bring unity to the Senate Democrats.

"The governor plays such a critical role here," said Zephyr Teachout, a Fordham Law School professor and Democratic state committeewoman who lost a Democratic primary to the governor in 2014. "Cuomo, behind the scenes, has supported this arrangement because it gives him an excuse for not being the progressive leader he should be."

The Cuomo team disputed that characterization, saying the governor brokered a unity agreement in 2014, one that unraveled when the Democrats did not win enough seats later that year to take a clear

majority.

"The governor fully supports Andrea Stewart-Cousins and Democratic unification," said Richard Azzopardi, a Cuomo spokeswoman. "He spent a lot of time and energy and successfully brought the two sides together in 2014 and is working very hard again to end the personal agendas and infighting that is causing the divide and unify the factions, which is more important than ever when our Democratic values are under attack by the Trump administration."

While the 63-member chamber includes 32 Democrats, the fact that one of them, Sen. Simcha Felder, D-Brooklyn, has chosen to caucus with Republicans and the eight IDC members are allied with the GOP has deprived the Democrats of the opportunity to take the helm.

From their vantage point, upstate Republicans argue their partnership with the IDC greatly benefits New Yorkers residing in counties north of New York City.

Because the majority of Senate Democrats come from the metropolitan region, downstate priorities would lead the agenda in Albany should the GOP lose its grip on power, said both Sen. Rob Ortt, R-Niagara County, and Sen. Jim Seward, R-Milford.

"From a policy standpoint, it would be nothing short of the end of upstate New York, politically and culturally," said Ortt, noting New York City representatives are out of step with sportsmen groups when it comes to such issues as gun regulation.

Seward said that in the two years that Democrats ran the Senate -- 2009 and 2010 -- "upstate took a bath" with no funds for roads and bridges to match the expenditures poured into New York City mass transit projects.

"This is recent history, so it's not speculation as to what would happen," he said

Seward also said he is "pleased to partner with the IDC," as it allows the Senate to take a bipartisan approach and provides Albany with "checks and balances" that would be absent if one party ruled state government.

The IDC's alliance with GOP senators had been an issue three years ago when Teachout challenged Cuomo in the Democratic primary. But since then, she said, many more Democrats have become annoyed that lawmakers elected as Democrats are helping the Republicans maintain control of the Senate.

Teachout said she no longer has to explain what the letters "IDC" stand for when she speaks to voters across the state. "One of the most exciting responses to Trump's election is that it has led to a

substantial movement for getting rid of the IDC," she said.

When advised that the Cuomo administration argues the governor has called for unity among Senate Democrats, Teachout responded: "Has he stood up and excoriated any member of the IDC by name?"

The downside of the status quo, as Sen. Michael Gianaris of Queens, the deputy Democratic leader, sees it, is that the IDC has enabled the Republicans to sit on progressive legislation favored by voters who elected Democrats.

"Every day we are losing the opportunity to establish New York as a bulwark against the Trump administration," Gianaris said. "People who are elected as Democrats should work with other Democrats, especially when most members of the Senate are elected as Democrats."

The division doesn't appear to be ending any time soon. Candice Giove, spokeswoman for the IDC senators, said not a single member of the mainstream Democratic group has signed onto a "robust agenda" of measures recently issued by her group.

That package includes new protections for family planning services and proposed campaign finance rules.

Whether Cuomo takes a more active role in trying to bridge the fractious Democratic division could hinge on how he perceives the potential risks to his own political fortunes, said Gerald Benjamin, a long-time observer of state politics and vice president for regional engagement at the State University at New Paltz.

Benjamin said governors have traditionally stayed away from leadership fights in the legislative chambers.

"The governor has found it a comfortable situation to be dealing with a coalition government because it gives him greater flexibility and he can tack either way" on many legislative issues, Benjamin said.

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