

Little faces new challenges as GOP loses Albany clout

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ALBANY — The Republicans who have controlled the state Senate for much of the past 50 years are about to lose their hand on the statehouse steering wheel, thrust into minority status by the Nov. 6 elections.

To the victor, it's said, go the spoils.

And in Albany that means the Democrats, effective Jan. 1, will control the legislative budgets for both the Senate and Assembly, as well as the most pivotal roles on committees that review bills and determine which legislation will get to a floor vote.

For Republican senators going through the Albany turnstyle from majority to minority status, the reduced clout is expected to crimp their ability to generate campaign funds and advance the legislation they'd like to see on the front burner.

'A HEAVY LIFT'

The diminished power will also mean they will be doling out fewer grants to community groups in their districts, said Gerald Benjamin, a longtime observer of New York's statehouse scene and a retired State University at New Paltz political science professor.

"There is going to be a major effort to keep everyone (on the GOP side) engaged, with the argument being that they must win back the majority in the next election or they are not going to control the redistricting," a process that takes place in concert with the decennial census to be conducted in 2020.

But the goal of catapulting Republicans back into Albany's catbird seat will be a "heavy lift," Benjamin noted.

He said the Republicans in New York will remain challenged by the fact the next election will come in a presidential election year, when incumbent President Donald Trump, a conservative Republican who polls suggest is unpopular in the state's most populous regions, is at the top of the ticket.

IN MINORITY

Upstate Republican senators interviewed by CNHI acknowledged they will have to make an adjustment to their soon-to-be status as members of a minority conference after relishing the perquisites of power from being in the majority.

The role of being a minority conference lawmaker will not be entirely new for Sen. Betty Little (R-Queensbury), who spent six years as a member of the GOP Assembly minority team.

And when Democrats briefly controlled the Senate in 2009 and 2010, she had to get used to not being in the majority for that period.

NO. CO. ADVOCATE

Calling herself an optimist, Little said she expects that she will still be able to make a case for the priorities of the North Country even with Democrats at the helm of both chambers of the Legislature.

She noted that Gov. Andrew Cuomo has been an advocate for North Country economic development and has personally promoted tourism in the Adirondacks by dint of his "Adirondack Challenge" visits to highlight outdoors and recreational opportunities for visitors.

"This has brought a lot of public awareness to the opportunities we have to offer in our region," she said. "I think we are still going to have the governor on our side."

GUN CONTROL

Little said she is braced for the possibility that Democrats will try to enact stronger gun control laws with initiatives that would likely be seen as burdensome by hunting enthusiasts and other gun owners in her district.

"They ought to have more of a focus on (enforcement connected to) people gaining guns illegally," the senator said, contending that measures that burden lawful gun owners have no public safety value.

"The gun laws in New York state are among the strictest in the entire country. They (gun control proponents) really ought to be advocating elsewhere."

STATE PRISONS

All legislation dealing with housing regulations must now pass through Little, the chairwoman of the Senate Housing Committee.

But she will be stripped of that leadership role Jan. 1, when the Democrats take charge.

And with some Democrats arguing the state should do more to expand alternatives from incarcerating lawbreakers, Little said she is braced to advocate for the state prisons in the North Country — and the thousands of jobs that come with them.

WON'T ROCK BOAT

While some of her GOP colleagues say they will be vociferous in exposing what they see as flaws in Democratic legislation, Little said she is "not the boat-rocking type" and will likely take a more moderate approach to working out differences over the agenda as it emerges.

She said she hopes to illustrate the importance of her district to the entire state, pointing out that many people who live in downstate districts controlled by Democrats have vacation homes in the North Country.

Little said she expects the upcoming transition of power to the Democrats will lead to a "more civil" relationship than what came about after Republicans fell from power

in 2009, when political elbows were thrown.

A LITTLE LOUDER

Sen. Rob Ortt (R-North Tonawanda) said he expects Republicans are going to have to be a "little louder" to get their message heard at the statehouse, while also being aggressive in pointing out their criticisms of Democratic initiatives they see as harmful to businesses, farmers and gun owners.

The change in emphasis at the statehouse is already being noticed, he said, pointing out that while Senate Republicans have criticized the state parole board for releasing convicted cop killers, some Democratic senators are contending that the parole board should become more generous to offenders by striving for higher release rates.

There may even be some benefits by reinvigorating the Republican Party in New York, Ortt suggested.

"We're going to have to earn some of those seats back and show New Yorkers that we have a different vision," Ortt said.

"And maybe by being in the wilderness it will help us better articulate what separates us from the Democrats and why we need some kind of balance in Albany."

ACROSS THE AISLE

Sen. Jim Seward (R-Milford) said that while he and his Senate Republican colleagues are about to vacate their positions of power, they will continue to represent a vast part of the upstate region, with just three Democrats in the chamber hailing from communities north of the lower Hudson Valley.

"We're going to continue to stand up for our part of the state," said Seward, a member of the Senate since 1987.

Over the years, he noted, he has built up relationships with some Democrats.

"I'm going to continue to reach across to the other side of the aisle and try to get the needs and concerns of my area front and center," he said.

Seward, in recent years, has been one of the Senate's most powerful members, serving as chairman of the Insurance Committee, overseeing legislation impacting a major industry, and benefiting his ability to beef up his campaign fund.

GRAVE CONCERNS

He'll also lose his chairmanship, but said he hopes to play a role in derailing some measures being promoted by Senate Democrats.

"I have some grave concerns with the things I have been hearing," Seward said. "They are talking about having New York state government-run health care, taxpayer-funded campaigns and giving driver's licenses to people who are in this country illegally.

"And that type of agenda is the wrong direction as far as I'm concerned because that all translates into higher spending and higher taxes in New York at a time we need to be more affordable place to live and create new economic opportunities for people.

NEW LEADER

The new leader of the Senate will be Sen. Andrea Stewart-Cousins, a Yonkers Democrat.

When she takes over the chamber, she will be the first woman in state history to oversee a legislative chamber at the New York statehouse.

"People will finally be getting the kind of government they've been voting for for so many years," Stewart-Cousins told reporters this week after her fellow Democrats elected her as the leader of their conference.

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