

Hugh Reynolds

Toward transparency

I don't make it a practice of commenting on fellow columnists, but I want to commend Alan Chartock, the *Freeman's* long-time capital columnist, for re-running his predictions for 2015 a few weeks ago. Given the dearth of crystal balls in our trade, that took guts.

Chartock, a retired political-science professor at SUNY New Paltz and Albany and radio station manager, wears many hats. His glory days were when he had, to the envy of colleagues, direct access to Mario Cuomo, one of the more brilliantly talkative governors in modern times. His "Me and Mario" program on WAMC was must-listen for insights into government and witty exchanges between the host and his subject.

Given Cuomo's penchant for grilling interviewees, it was often difficult to discern which was which. The bromance of political expedience came a cropper when Chartock wrote some unpleasant though truthful items about Andrew Cuomo's aborted run for governor in 2002.

I'm not about to pound the old professor, whose predictions for last year were by and large predictable.

It's what Chartock didn't predict that caught my eye. Writing sometime in the last two weeks of 2014, Chartock inched out on a limb by predicting an unnamed state senator would be indicted, convicted and serve several years in jail in 2015. Easy call there. Senator Tom Libous of Binghamton was already in the crosshairs of federal prosecutor Preet Bharara.

Only days after Chartock's predications hit the papers, Assembly speaker Sheldon Silver was indicted on corruption charges. That was swiftly followed by similar accusations against Senate majority leader Dean Skelos. By year's end, both had been separately convicted on all charges in federal court.

And nobody outside the immediate players, not the talking heads, the radio gabbers, bloggers, capital columnists, nor fellow legislators, had a clue?

Which brings me to the subject of government transparency.

We hear a lot about it these days. Everybody says they're for it. The public wants to know what's going on with their tax dollars, even though most pay little attention. The media is constantly sniffing around. Good government groups are always in the forefront of open government. Government leaders are forever telling us how they value and promote transparency.

And yet two crooks like Silver and Skelos can bribe and barter, threaten and cajole, pocket millions for themselves and relatives for years, and nobody knows nothin'?

The fact is transparency in government is an oxymoron. Government is politics. And politics is a conspiracy between warring factions. The golden rule of politics is he who has the gold rules. But information is the gold.

Not to question anybody's veracity, but a Winston Churchill World War II quote comes to mind, to wit: "In time of war, when truth is so precious, it must be attended by a bodyguard of lies." And, of course, absolute secrecy.

Leaders may start out with the intent of providing more transparency but they soon come to realize that giving out information — unless carefully presented to make them look good — is akin to giving away the store. Because the same people who battled them for the position they hold — the other party — will be in opposition when their terms are up.

The information we do get from government, typically via press release, is usually of conclusions reached, of plans made. How they got there, the internal decision-making process, the pros and cons, who was consulted, or not, ideas discussed and rejected, is rarely part of the discussion. Some would say government has to operate that way, to put forth half-baked proposals for public consumption would only invite dissent and doubt. Or it could pro-

mote a more vigorous public debate.

Controlling the information

I've watched the process of transparency dissipate over many administrations. The first step is to order all department heads to clear any public pronouncements with the elected leader. Media, or the general public for that matter, will not be allowed direct access to those departments. Understandably, dear leader doesn't want to read news of his or her administration before hearing about it first hand.

My first exposure to this situation came early-on. As city-hall reporter, I had rung up a department head for an update on something routine, the city's annual street-paving program. He gave me a list of streets and we printed it. The next day the department head was called to the mayor's carpet and admonished for "issuing press releases."

He asked me a question and I answered it, the department head said. I'll make those announcements, responded the mayor. Sometimes the boss gets back to media, sometimes he doesn't. The rule is that he controls the information.

I don't think so-called freedom-of-information laws, all the rage in post-Watergate years but toothless as a hockey player, have made much difference. Public officials accused of violations of such statutes suffer but mild embarrassment from a public which really doesn't appreciate that what they don't know can hurt them. See Silver and Skelos.

Media will continue to report on government activities, with mixed results. More likely, what inside information that does seep out will come from disgruntled employees, opposition forces or hardened journalists on those rare occasions when they're given the time and resources to pursue real investigative reporting.

My prediction is that even with well-intended calls for transparency this situation will not improve. I dare say the current crop of public servants, having learned their trade from secretive predecessors, is even better at hiding information. Pity the public.

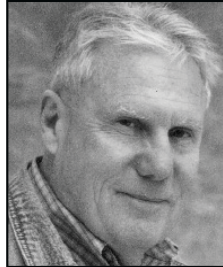
Hail to the chief

Incoming Ulster County Legislature chairman Ken Ronk will deliver his state-of-the-county address later this winter, but his brief remarks after being sworn in last week as the fifteenth legislative leader gave some clues as to his agenda.

"A united legislature," Ronk said former chairman Gerry Benjamin, his political science professor at SUNY New Paltz, once told him, "can pretty much do what it wants." Ronk hastened to add that he did not mean that under his leadership the legislature would necessarily be "anti-executive." But the message could not have been lost on the executive.

Professor Benjamin is a unique combination of ivory-tower academic and grassroots politician, a man given to subtle distinctions. By "united legislature," he meant a body with common purpose and direction, something difficult to achieve in a 23-member legislature.

Ronk's goal, it appears, is to unite a legislature divided between pro-executive and indifferent-executive members. His 14-9 election as chairman reaffirmed (with a slightly different mix) the Parete-Donaldson bipartisan coalition that elected Democrat John Parete chairman the last two years (in league with Ronk's Republicans). Ronk is attempting to extend that majority of like minds to numbers that speak real clout. Toward that end, he is expected to reform the committee system to include committee



chairs from minority Democrats.

Chamber music

I don't think this has happened before, but three former chairmen are now sitting in the Ulster legislature: Richard Gerentine, Dave Donaldson and John Parete. Parete and Donaldson are seated in the back row on the Democratic side; Republican Gerentine, as long-standing chairman of finance, retains his front-row perch.

Parete is seated just across a narrow aisle from his son Richard, who after being elected on the Republican ticket is now caucusing with the GOP. Father and son are close enough to hold hands if they so choose.

Donaldson declared himself "quite torn" in voting for Ronk, but that was just Dave being Dave. Donaldson voted for chairman with Ronk's Republicans for Parete the last two years.

John Parete, in his down-home style, praised the man who made him chairman and took it away. "He's not the Judas goat type who would lead you to the cliff and then step aside," Parete said. "I would imagine that if they wrote something in his high-school yearbook [a dozen years ago] it would be 'works and plays well with others.'"

What with rumors of Democratic mischief in the air, newly-elected majority leader Mary Beth Maio wasn't taking any chances. The Republicans had heard that disgruntled Democrats might raise objections to Ronk's election. "You'll sit next to me if there's any bullshit," she whispered at caucus to legislature attorney Erika Guerin just prior to the organizational session. Democrats, perhaps sensing futility, behaved.

Under the heading of time flies, freshman Woodstock Democrat Jon Heppner, at 27 the legislature's youngest member, advised me that I once covered his great-grandfather, legislator Addison Jones.

Ad, as he was fondly known, was a colorful character. A dairy farmer with a grip like iron, he operated Jones Dairy and sponsored numerous local championship bowling teams under that name. Some competed in national tournaments. Unlike his great-grandson, the "bowling milkman" came to government in his twilight years some 50 years ago.

Racing around

This just in: Democratic sheep farmer declares for state senate. Could be bad news for incumbent Republican George Amedore.

No, we're not talking about former Democratic senator Cecilia Tkaczyk, the sheep farmer Amedore put out to pasture in 2014, but one Sara Niccoli, sheep farmer from Montgomery County and current Town of Palatine supervisor. Niccoli, 38, announced on her Facebook page that she was considering a run.

Elsewhere, assemblyman Pete Lopez, citing family health issues, announced he was withdrawing from the race for the Republican nomination for Congress. Lopez could have been a contender, but was up against two challengers who had raised more than a million bucks each.

Ulster County comptroller Elliott Auerbach — they call him the ponderer — has become a walking encyclopedia of the 19th congressional district since announcing last month he was thinking of seeking the Democratic nomination. Meanwhile the Working Families Party is urging former party candidate for governor Zephyr Teachout to run. Andrew Cuomo, whom she challenged in a primary last year, might have something to say about that.

News of progressive Dem Teachout's possible candidacy drove Republican hopeful Andrew Heaney over the edge. In a recent press release, he called her "a threat to our way of life." Really? And I thought the urbane Heaney the more temperate of that gang. More a threat to Heaney's political future, Teachout was seen walking around uptown Kingston last weekend.

Down Orange County way a spokesman for veteran senator Bill Larkin confirms he'll seek reelection to a thirteenth term in November. Larkin, who turns 88 next month, served five terms in the Assembly before being elected a state senator in 1988.

And finally, the winner of last week's trivia contest on what building in Kingston is named for former congressman Joe Resnick, was, ta-da, nobody. Apparently, Joe, who died in 1969, has been all but forgotten. The county public works building on Hurley Avenue in Kingston was named for him when Democrats controlled the legislature in 1978-79.