

SNG-Budget blame game-7-27-15

A pox on both your houses

By Jim Nowlan

The relative handful who follow Illinois politics closely are captivated by the unresolved mano a mano tussle between Gov. Bruce Rauner and House Speaker Mike Madigan over the failure to enact a state budget.

The policy outcome is not in much doubt: a somewhat trimmed budget and a bump back up in the income or other taxes, to be hammered out sometime before Labor Day.

The open question is whether Rauner will, as part of the deal, achieve any of his “turnaround agenda” of business-friendly changes and votes on term limits and redistricting reform.

A related, more beguiling matter for political junkies is which combatant will come out of this adjudged the winner.

As a friend once observed, politics is “football without muscles,” so we love the political game going on.

At the moment, most of my political friends seem to think (worry?) that Speaker Madigan, the wily veteran, has the upper hand with Rauner, the feisty newcomer. But we are still in the early rounds of this contest, if I may mix metaphors.

To get an assessment of how the fight is playing out, I meandered from my home office in Toulon down the main drag to Connie’s Country Kitchen, the fount of all wisdom.

The farmers start coming into Connie’s about 5 a.m., sitting communally at the big back table near the kitchen. The ladies come in later and sit at an equally big table in a small side room.

I asked about 20 at the two tables what they thought of the budget stalemate in Springfield. After making sure they wouldn't be quoted, the caffeine addicts opened up.

One in this Republican-oriented café said he thought, "Rauner is trying to do what's right." Then came the torrent of general criticisms:

"I think we should fire the whole bunch," and "They need to act like grownups," and "We should put them in a room, lock the doors and not let them out 'til they solve this thing," and, "I wish they could just get along."

Then the comment that got everyone's heads nodding in agreement: "They're both to blame. I'm disgusted with the whole lot!"

In other words, as I heard things from this unscientific but probably somewhat representative sample, the political situation in Springfield isn't ripe. That is, folks haven't focused on the issue just yet and don't have articulate thoughts about who specifically, if anyone, is to blame for inaction on the budget.

That will come sometime later, after state employees go through payless paydays and local social service providers announce that disabled children are being thrown out on the street.

Both Madigan and Rauner bring formidable power to the table. The Speaker has controlled the House for three decades. Because of rules he has crafted over those years, nary a single piece of legislation nor even an amendment can ever be acted on without his consent.

In addition, Madigan has built up a huge campaign war chest that he uses to support backers and punish those who would stray.

On the other hand, the new governor inherited a powerful office that provides him full, line-item, reduction and amendatory vetoes.

In addition, the billionaire Rauner has amassed an unprecedented \$30 million in campaign funds, dwarfing those available to the Speaker.

Rauner has deftly challenged Madigan to pass a tax increase on his own if he believes one is needed, as the Speaker has just enough Democratic votes to override Rauner vetoes.

Madigan will never support a tax increase, however, without some GOP votes. He lives and breathes to maintain his party majority, and would not put his team at risk of shouldering all the blame for a tax increase.

Democrats must share most of the blame for bringing us to this parlous situation. After all, they have been in charge of both legislative and executive branches from 2003, when disgraced ex-governor Rod Blagojevich began grossly mismanaging the state, until this year.

Be that as it may, Rauner is now governor, the chief executive. He more than others will be expected to lead the state and solve its problems, while the slender Madigan sits quietly in his office, like a Buddha on a starvation diet, unmovable.

Public pressure to resolve the situation will grow, slowly at first, but relentlessly.

When the coffee klatches at places like Connie's Country Kitchen finally focus on the matter and begin to grumble, action will happen.

But who will catch the blame? At present, it appears to be—"a pox on both your houses."