

SNG-Despondency envelopes all but Rauner-Madigan-6-6-16

Despondency envelopes all but Rauner-Madigan

By Jim Nowlan

In recent years I have been on the outer fringe of the periphery of Illinois politics and government. To refresh myself, I spent the last two days of the recent legislative session haunting the corridors of our stately capitol.

I talked with former college students of mine who are now senators, reps, lobbyists and agency officials throughout the bureaucracy.

Frustration isn't a big enough word to capture their overall mood. Despondency, with all hopes for a better day slipping away, says it better.

Everyone in the capitol except for Gov. Bruce Rauner and House Speaker Mike Madigan will tell you, if some must do so off the record, that this second year without a state budget is hurting the state down to its foundations.

These alpha males are locked in a now highly personal death struggle that blocks out consideration of anything but political victory and, each hopes, vindication that all the state has suffered will have been worth it.

Even when a budget is enacted, the well will be so poisoned that constructive, far-sighted policymaking may be impossible until both men are gone from the scene.

Madigan seems to think he has the upper hand at the moment. His 3/5ths Democratic majority in the House stands shoulder to shoulder with him, capable of blocking anything Rauner wants to achieve in the way of business-friendly, union-weakening changes.

For Madigan public policy has always been a means not an end (the end has always accruing yet more political control).

Now he relishes the prospect of rubbing Rauner's nose in the dirt, to show that the plucky kid from the Irish Southwest Side of Chicago has bested the privileged, snot-nosed brat from the North Shore.

During my visit to Springfield, I did see a few chinks in the armor of the two combatants.

Two House Republicans broke ranks to vote for a successful override of a Rauner veto of a pension bill that would help Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel.

Rep. David Harris (R-Arlington Heights) gave a calm, thoughtful explanation on the House floor of his vote to override Rauner.

But there was no jeering, no cat calls from fellow GOP lawmakers, as I might have heard in decades past for similar apostasy.

It was as if Harris's colleagues were silently cheering, as if to send a message to Rauner that they also won't be treated as toadies forever.

Across the capitol rotunda, the Senate Democrats resoundingly defeated a Madigan-crafted budget that included \$7.5 billion more in spending than revenues to support such.

Now the legislative conflict carries into the summer.

I believe the flashpoint to force the alpha males to sit down and talk political turkey for the first time will be the prospect of some public schools not opening in the fall.

Politicians can shaft the poor and put college careers on hold by withholding scholarship funding, but no politician will risk catching the blame from parents of 2 million school kids should the opening of school in August be iffy.

Of course, the lawmakers could, once again, enact a bill to fund schools and leave the rest of the state without a budget.

As for the two principals, Rauner's spine is steeled by repeated editorials from the Wall Street Journal and Chicago Tribune, cheering him on, whispering in his ear that the only way to straighten out Illinois is to destroy Madigan.

The fundamental problem with that is that Rauner lacks the tools, even with his bottomless pit of money, to destroy the deeply bunkered Madigan, much as many might wish it could be done.

Madigan is, on the other hand, showing signs of political hardening of the arteries. He is so consumed by his decades-long game of maintaining and building political power that he has now totally lost sight of the fact that some things other than political control matter.

Enterprising University of Illinois graduate student Melissa Heil has created an Illinois Austerity Atlas, which documents the scores of thousands of people who suffer from lack of a state budget.

Unfortunately, the hurt goes much deeper. As I have mentioned before, and it is just one example, morale at my beloved U. of I. is rock bottom because of the debilitating uncertainty over its future.

I continue to weep for Illinois.