

SNG-IL dysfunction matter of history-7-10-17

Was our present Illinois dysfunction shaped by history?

By Jim Nowlan

Retired politics professor Ken Redfield and I sat in the cafeteria of a gray, Soviet-style 1950s state office building in Springfield this past week to ruminate about a book we are doing on Illinois over the past half-century.

We are intrigued by the idea that our state's post-2000 dysfunction may have been prefigured over the decades by a mix of economic, institutional and political changes.

As thinkers from Seneca in ancient Rome to A. Lincoln have observed, "All that's past is prologue."

Why the past half century? We enacted a new state constitution in 1970. Modernizing governor Richard Ogilvie came into office 1969, enacting the income tax and expanding state government. State economic decline relative to the nation accelerated about then, as shrinkage in our rich manufacturing jobs base began to show. And significant net out-migration of whites became evident.

So why might events and change over the period have shaped the present dysfunction?

Institutions matter. The 1970 Constitution guaranteed pension benefits and put in place a redistricting process that has resulted in gerrymandered, polarized government, among other strait-jacketing constraints.

In 1980, voters approved a switch from three-member, moderating, bipartisan House districts to single-member districts. This has contributed to concentration of power in legislative leaders (read: House Speaker Mike Madigan, longest serving speaker in American history).

The economy matters. Illinois has been reduced from one of the richest states pre-1970 to barely above average among states in wealth today. So, while we continued to fund state programs as if we were wealthy, we did so by failing to put money aside for pensions. At the same time Medicaid costs were ratcheting up sharply throughout the period, squeezing money for education and public universities.

To address pension underfunding, in the early 1990s Gov. Edgar and lawmakers imposed dramatic increases in state outlays for pensions, but not to take effect until 2000. How to pay for these huge new outlays has flummoxed elected officials ever since. The pension problem is the singular reason we are in budget crisis today.

People matter. Disgraced, imprisoned Gov. Rod Blagojevich was incredibly corrupt. He operated Illinois like a statewide Chicago ward office, where almost every government action had a high price.

The state's reputation thus suffered badly at home and across the nation. Illinois became a late-night TV laughingstock. We fell into a funk. People talked about leaving. Some are.

In 2014, voters decided they had enough of Democratic politics and inept governor Pat Quinn. We were willing to give outsider Bruce Rauner a chance at the helm.

Love him or hate him, Rauner came in with a single objective—never expressed in his campaign, that I remember—to blow things up and drive out the government Establishment, whose face is Speaker Madigan.

The governor's premise is that this Establishment—and the institutional and economic framework Establishment leaders had to work with—has created our present mess. And he may be largely right.

Rauner and Madigan simply don't talk, as adults otherwise would do. Instead, they lob toxic verbal canisters back and forth over the ramparts.

The Rauner objective is to turn Blue Illinois Red. He made modest gains in this regard in 2016, yet needs at least two or three more election cycles to achieve his objective, if ever. Given the present budget embarrassment, with folks likening Illinois to bankrupt Puerto Rico (incorrectly), I don't think Illinois can wait that long.

Until Rauner and Madigan sit down and really talk about the future of Illinois, no real progress will be made, as each side can block action by the other.

As I have said often in this space, the tragedy is that Illinois has possibly unmatched strengths in infrastructure (interstates, rail, air, water), location, college-educated workforce and (maybe formerly, I fear) higher education.

What lessons are there for us?

Craft less detailed, prescriptive state constitutions, so as change becomes necessary, it is a bit easier.

Take longer looks. Throughout the past half-century, there has never been any comprehensive thinking about where we want the state to be in 10 years, and of how to get there.

For the present, state politicians should act like most city councils do—and address our problems.