

SNG-Let's bring back Jim Edgar-4-17-17

Let's bring back Gov. Jim Edgar

By Jim Nowlan

The state many of us hold dear is being wrecked by elected officials of both parties. I say, let's sweep them all off the table and bring popular, effective former governor Jim Edgar out of retirement.

Gov. Bruce Rauner is into his third year without ever having proposed a credible balanced budget, with nothing on the horizon.

Rauner has also talked about the need for a big infrastructure program as well as education finance reforms, both badly needed. Yet he has never proposed anything for either. Budget, infrastructure, education—that's pretty much what state government is all about.

And the collateral wreckage is incalculable. Higher education is imploding, non-profit social service agencies are undergoing a die-off, business investment is tanking because of fiscal instability and uncertainty, and people across Illinois are in a deep funk about their state, which probably encourages flight.

It is surprising that after a successful career doing deals in the private sector, Rauner is an abysmal failure at deal-making in Springfield.

He would like to dictate his policies in a setting where the opposition party holds most of the cards. I am confident Rauner could have gotten half or more of his agenda if he had simply sat down man-to-man at the beginning of his term with House Speaker Mike Madigan.

Now, if ever there is a budget, he will get one-third of that at best, plus wear the collar for the wreckage.

Madigan is behaving no better. After half a century in office, Speaker (and Illinois Democratic Party chair) Madigan has ossified in place.

After being called corrupt and the worst kind of scalawag by Rauner in endless ads and even a movie, Madigan is now obsessed with knocking the governor off his pillar in 2018, while in the meantime the state and its needs be damned.

Then, at stage left, there is the silent Greek chorus of state legislators. I have come to think of the present set of lawmakers as “the little people.”

They have convinced themselves that their re-election is more important to the state than is the state’s well-being itself.

As a result, they cower, voiceless, in fear of doing anything to upset their patrons, the governor and speaker respectively, who hold the money and power critical to their re-election.

Senate leaders John Cullerton (Dem) and Christine Radogno (GOP), who both care about the state, are to be commended for their efforts to craft a budget. Yet they are surrounded by the helpless little people and a governor who undercuts Radogno at every turn.

I am fascinated by how little most Illinois residents know or care about state government.

If state funding were required to keep the lights on for Friday night football, there would never have been a budget impasse. Outrage would have forced action.

Yet other than the several thousand who follow incisive pundit Rich Miller and his Illinois CapitolFax and blog, no one else seems to much care about Illinois, certainly not to outrage.

I say it’s time to bring back two-term Republican governor Jim Edgar (1991-98). (Disclosure: I have not discussed this with old friend Edgar, as I know what his wife would say.)

Edgar took over during a budget crisis and brought it into balance. Those who went into his office to seek more spending came to call him “Gov. No.” When Edgar left office, the state had a budget surplus.

Edgar was the first governor to address the state’s pension funding shortfall, though sharply increased payments into the undernourished retirement funds did not begin until he was safely out of office.

In 1993, folks along the Mississippi River suffered a once-in-a-century flood. They were devastated, thousands of homes and small towns ruined. Though he couldn’t, like King Canute, order the waters to recede, Edgar focused state resources and his own attention laser-like on giving comfort and support to the victims. His efforts should be a Harvard Business School case study in public leadership.

Edgar left office with the highest approval ratings of any governor in Illinois history.

Edgar doesn’t have much money but wouldn’t have to raise much. He has the name recognition and public respect to crowd fund enough in contributions over the Internet to make his case to voters.

We need an experienced hand running the state. What we have hasn’t worked, and apparently isn’t going to work.

I say, let’s bring back Jim Edgar.