

SNG-New sheriff in town-6-8-15

New sheriff in town, but old sheriff hasn't left

By Jim Nowlan

Based on a couple of days nosing around the state capitol at the end of the regular session of the legislature, which adjourned with a whimper May 31, I sense that Illinois is in for several years of rancorous political conflict. There is a new sheriff in town (Gov. Bruce Rauner), but the old one hasn't left (House Speaker Mike Madigan).

Maybe a more apt simile is that of the dueling popes of Avignon and Rome, battling for years for papal supremacy around the end of the 14th Century.

After all, there won't be a single gunfight to the death between Republican Rauner and Madigan, but instead a protracted "Battle for the future of Illinois," as Rauner terms it, which appears likely to go on for years.

The combatants come from different worlds. Rauner is a businessman from the rarefied high-finance atmosphere of buying and selling companies; he is used to being king of the hill.

Madigan and his protégé, state senate president John Cullerton, are professional politicians, for whom politics is also a business. They have pretty much run the state legislature since the 1980s.

Rauner wants to take them down.

In the political short-term, Gov. Bruce Rauner simply must win a good part of his ambitious "turnaround agenda," which includes business-friendly reforms in workers' compensation costs plus term limits for lawmakers and a property tax freeze, among other significant changes he covets.

That is why he tenaciously ties this program to any budget deal this summer, in which Rauner admits there will have to be state tax increases (up from the reductions that went into effect Jan. 1).

Lacking substantive reforms in the summer budget deal, Rauner would be branded by the stern, influential *Wall Street Journal* editorial writers as a loser, just another tax increaser who caved to the Democrats.

A state budget will be enacted this summer, as neither Rauner nor the Dems want to be blamed for shutting down state government, at least not for too long. But not until Rauner gets something out of the deal.

Yet the deal will be a patch-work budget aimed at getting the state through the year, barely. This will be instead of a needed set of comprehensive revenue and spending reforms that would put the state on a path to long-term fiscal stability.

The Democrat-controlled legislature passed a budget at session's end without any GOP votes.

The spending bills purport to cut \$3+ billion from last year's \$36 billion general budget, but the budget apparently shorts the state employee health program by \$700 million, even though the state is already a similar amount behind in paying its bills. [(Coincidentally, I was recently refused as a patient by a specialty health provider—because I am covered by the state, which has been in arrears to providers for years.)]

The budget is also probably way short in the money needed this coming year for the \$16 billion Medicaid program.

More budgetary smoke and mirrors yet, as I say, a budget will be enacted before school starts in the fall.

For the out years, expect a political shooting war. Rauner has amassed \$34 million in various political funds, with more available, I'm sure. This will help keep his minority party members in line and lavishly fund challengers against Democrat incumbents.

The present legislative district lines are exquisitely drawn by Democrats to favor their own kind. Veteran elections expert Kent Redfield of the University of Illinois at Springfield sees no way that Rauner can capture the legislature for the GOP, even with his unprecedented amounts of campaign cash.

Yet Rauner might well be able to cut into the big Democrat majorities and soften up some sitting members to vote for parts of his program.

As an observer of state politics since the 1960s, I have never seen a political leader develop so much influence over his party so quickly as Rauner has—not since Chicago's legendary mayor Richard J. Daley bossed Cook County Democrats in the 1950-70s.

[Daley used political jobs to cement his power; Rauner is using money instead of jobs, the latter having largely been taken out of Illinois politics by the U.S. Supreme Court.]

The governor has put more than \$4 million into the perennially strapped-for-cash state GOP organization, which he pretty much owns, as one observer put it.

Now Rauner is taking on the more daunting task of wresting state power from the entrenched Democrats in this "blue state."

The new sheriff has his work cut out for himself.