

SNG-Tough on Rauner-5-16-16

“Why are you so tough on Rauner?”

By Jim Nowlan

Several readers have asked of me, in effect, “Why are you so tough on Rauner?”

The readers appear to think House Speaker Mike Madigan is solely to blame for our shameful budget impasse.

I consolidate below several observations made in several of my columns over the past year.

Madigan has served in state government since he was elected to the Illinois State Constitutional Convention in 1969, almost half a century ago, most of that time as speaker.

He deserves a big share of the blame, as no one matches his experience in knowing how to get things done in Springfield, or in how to block others from doing so.

Yet Madigan and Rauner could have reached a respectable budget compromise early last year, if both had been willing to sit down to talk things out, rather than lob ultimatums over the ramparts from a safe distance. Neither one was.

Rauner’s strategy has from the get-go been hopelessly flawed, and he surely realized this months ago. Yet he appears too proud to admit as much.

I also sense that the governor doesn’t listen to other people. A pity.

The basic strategy has been to threaten to withhold support for a tax increase, in return for Madigan’s capitulation to a sometimes long, sometimes shorter, list of demands in his “Turnaround Agenda.”

I voted for the governor and have wanted him and Illinois to succeed. I also support his agenda of business-friendly changes, term limits and redistricting reform.

Yet wishing and fulminating and making silly personal attacks on Madigan won't make it happen.

Rauner's threat to be a hold-out on a tax increase is hollow. Along with every close observer, Madigan knows that an increase of some sort (after a tax reduction in 2014) is absolutely necessary to balance the state budget. And Rauner will ultimately have to sign off on such, threat to not do so notwithstanding.

Second, Madigan doesn't need anything. And how do you negotiate with a person who doesn't need anything! His only need over the decades has been to maintain political control.

He obviously doesn't feel sufficient pressure to help the little people who are suffering as a result of the budget impasse from the loss of mental health and other social services, most of whom are probably Democrats.

For Madigan, public policy is a means, not an end. A means to enhancing his power.

Madigan's power is totally negative. He can block literally any bill that originates in the General Assembly, through his control of his House Rules Committee, which determines if a bill—absolutely every bill from the House and Senate— will ever see the light of day.

But Madigan has been willing to negotiate and compromise with governors over the years.

And Madigan is vulnerable, I believe, to the “legacy thing.”

Madigan is human. He cannot want to be viewed in Illinois history as as a dark force who was in charge during the state's long decline.

How did we get here? There isn't enough space remaining, yet we know the huge pension payments needed to rebuild woefully depleted reserves are one factor—equal now to the revenue yield of almost two percentage points in the individual income tax rate of 3.75 percent.

Few have clean hands here.

Democrats and public employee unions opted over the years to devote limited resources to current operating budgets, rather than to squirrel enough away each year to meet future pension obligations.

Republicans such as otherwise good governors Jim Thompson and Jim Edgar did the same, pushing pension investments to “out years” when they would be gone from office.

And people like me, on the periphery of policymaking over the decades, were vaguely aware of the biennial pension bill, which oh so quietly wended its way through the legislative process.

The bill was filled with sweeteners for this or that group, including for the outrageously generous judges' pensions, among many other comfortable beneficiaries, pushing pension costs way up.

But we did nothing.

So here we are. Too much spending and not enough money, and a governor and speaker unwilling to sort it all out until the other says “uncle.”

Now is the time, belatedly, to act. The legislative session ends May 31. After that date, any bill requires a 3/5ths majority in each chamber to become effective immediately, making action tougher by an order of magnitude.

Meanwhile, I weep for Illinois.