

Governor's Bad Week Includes Horrible Polls, Key Departure

Written by Rich Miller

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"Off topic? I can't imagine what that would be," cracked Governor Pat Quinn last week during a press conference. Just hours before, his lieutenant governor had announced that she would not be his 2014 running mate.

Quinn usually does a pretty good job during his press conferences of convincing reporters to wait to ask off-topic questions until all questions about the subject at hand have been asked. Last week was no exception.

Quinn was holding a presser with U.S. Department of Health & Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius to discuss her conditional approval allowing Illinois to move forward with an online health-insurance exchange – a major step toward implementing the president's national health-care plan.

"You could get caught by stray bullets," Quinn jokingly warned the folks who had gathered with him to make the announcement. "You don't have to be part of the firing squad," he added with a laugh.

He knew what was coming. Earlier in the morning, the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute had released a poll showing that Quinn was badly trailing Lisa Madigan in a hypothetical primary matchup. By mid-morning, the late Senator Simon's daughter, Sheila, had announced that she wouldn't be running with Quinn again. Simon's aides said she didn't know about the poll from her father's think tank, but the irony wasn't lost on those of us who watch these things.

Sheila Simon was chosen by Quinn after Democratic primary voters made the mistake of nominating a pawn broker with a rather "colorful" past by the name of Scott Lee Cohen. After details of Cohen's alleged assault of a massage-therapist girlfriend emerged, Cohen dropped out of the race.

Quinn didn't pick Simon for her political acumen. She lost a Carbondale mayor's race that pretty much everybody thought was in the bag. Instead, she was chosen mainly for her name. The governor still idolizes Senator Simon, and that name is still held in high esteem among older Democrats.

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Sheila Simon, however, seemed to chafe at times under Quinn's leadership. Quinn demanded too much control of her budget. She had to fight for every dime, every hire, every square inch of office space. As with most of her predecessors, Simon found that the office wasn't worth much.

And it doesn't take a political scientist to see that Quinn could very well be doomed next time around. He barely won in 2010, mainly because he convinced voters that his heart was in the right place. But after four years on the job, the public still intensely dislikes him. The Simon Institute's recent poll pegged his job-approval rating at just 32.8 percent. Other polls have shown even worse numbers.

Anyway, back to last week's big announcement by Simon. Usually with these sorts of announcements, some sort of groundwork is done beforehand. A newspaper is given a tip, for instance. Top insiders are told what to expect. That didn't happen this time, though. I'd told my subscribers several days before that Simon was planning to run for another office and that Quinn was rumored to be looking for an African-American running mate, but that didn't come directly from inside. Some top Quinn staffers were completely caught off-guard by last week's announcement, which just fueled the fires.

So the mainstream media wasn't kind, and the poll's timing didn't help matters much. The fact that Quinn didn't appear with Simon at her announcement further underscored the curiosity of the whole thing.

Word from inside is that Simon told Quinn back in December that she had set her sights on comptroller. But she reportedly assumed that Republican incumbent Judy Baar Topinka would be retiring. Not happening.

So, treasurer – which will be an open seat contest if incumbent Republican Dan Rutherford pulls the trigger on a gubernatorial bid – is now on the radar screen, as well as attorney general if incumbent Democrat Lisa Madigan tries to move up to governor.

For Quinn, though, last week was a low point. Three straight polls have now shown him doing poorly against Attorney General Madigan. His 2010 running mate abruptly announces that she's

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abandoning him without even knowing where she'll land. And he's left to face reporters alone on what should have been a major news day for him.

This was, to say the least, not an auspicious beginning for Quinn's reelection effort.

Rich Miller also publishes Capitol Fax (a daily political newsletter) and CapitolFax.com.