

Psst! New Illinois Governor Has Some Secrets

Written by Rich Miller
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Every new governor has problems getting started. But Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich has had to learn some hard lessons during his first two weeks on the job. Most of the problems center around Blagojevich's penchant for absolute secrecy.

For instance, Senate President Emil Jones believes the governor isn't treating him with the proper respect. The Senate has an advise-and-consent role with gubernatorial appointments, but Blagojevich has acted as though the Senate doesn't exist. Blagojevich has, up until now, refused to run his top appointments by Jones to make sure everything was okay.

So, Jones ordered a political execution of sorts as a warning to the governor. The chairperson of the Senate Executive Appointments Committee let it be known that he would block Representative Chuck Hartke's pending appointment as agriculture-department director.

When the governor heard about this, he immediately began reaching out to Jones and Chairperson Rickey Hendon. It helped, but Hartke might still be in trouble. The legislator made what some thought were racially insensitive remarks a few years ago during a committee hearing. He has since apologized repeatedly and profusely, and is supported for the ag job by several African-American and Latino legislators. But Blagojevich has his work cut out for him on this one.

- Another example of how secrecy has hurt Blagojevich is his team's refusal to release the list of contributors to his grand inaugural festivities. For weeks, reporters asked Blagojevich's press staff for the list and were put off every time. Finally, the *Chicago Tribune's* political reporter asked Blagojevich himself for the list at a press conference last week. Blago had previously pledged to release the list, so he had no choice but to make it public.

The problem with releasing the list on Thursday was that the governor had called a press conference for that afternoon to talk about his new ethics plan. So, releasing a list of big-money inaugural donors – many with legislative agendas in Springfield – stepped on his own message of cleaning up government. Oops.

There was no reason to keep that list secret. Did they think reporters would just give up and

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stop asking for it? Please.

- For as long as anyone can remember, whenever Springfield's *State Journal-Register* newspaper has published stories about newly hired or promoted (or even fired) state employees, it has always disclosed those workers' salaries. If it's not actual policy, then it's at least tradition.

But for whatever reason, the Blagojevich administration refused to divulge to the paper the salaries of its top-level staff. The *SJ-R* reporters were petulantly informed that they'd have to wait until the workers were paid and then get that info from the state comptroller's office.

As you might imagine, this didn't go down well at the *SJ-R*. The paper published an editorial slamming the governor for not ponying up. "If the new governor really wants people to believe his reformer rhetoric, he needs back it up with reformer action." Oops again.

So, the full list was released on Thursday. It's like pulling teeth with these guys.

- It was also learned Thursday that the governor had appointed Lula Mae Ford, an African-American woman, to the Illinois Commerce Commission earlier in the week without an announcement.

The betting is that Blago didn't make an announcement because he wanted to use Ford in an upcoming press conference to balance out the unveiling of a bunch of white appointees. If that's true, then it's just more empty, crass symbolism from a governor who ought to be a lot more concerned with the real problems at hand.

- I told an acquaintance the other night that I had heard he was up for a major job in the Blago administration. He turned white as a ghost and begged me not to write about it. He even sent some mutual friends over to make sure I wouldn't disclose his new position.

Blagojevich's henchmen have reportedly told prospective appointees that if their name gets mentioned by the media, their appointments could be jeopardized. In other words, if they talk about their future, they might not have one.

This is all just ridiculous. The governor and his staff have enough to do without expending needless energy making sure that no scraps of information are released without their say-so.

Besides, keeping this many secrets will make anyone paranoid. And paranoid people don't usually govern too well.

Rich Miller also publishes Capitol Fax, a daily political newsletter. He can be reached at (<http://www.capitolfax.com>).