

Illinois' New Deputy Governor Faces a Rough Ride

Written by Rich Miller
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The general reaction to Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich's appointment of Bradley Tusk as his new deputy governor to replace Doug Scofield is not exactly drawing rave reviews. Scofield resigned as deputy governor to "spend more time with his family" after less than two months on the job. Word is, the popular, easy-going Scofield was literally being worked to death, and he needed to quit to save his health. Blagojevich has refused to hire enough people to run his office, so the few who are there are working harder than sled dogs on a North Pole expedition. Scofield's resignation is a direct result of Blagojevich's inability so far to effectively manage his office.

Scofield's replacement, Tusk, is a 29-year-old lawyer from New York City, and making a "kid" the deputy governor just isn't going over very well for several reasons.

Illinois is an incredibly parochial state, and it has always had a particularly severe inferiority complex when it comes to anything to do with New York.

Plus, we have more than our share of regional, racial, ethnic, and ideological political infighting that can be infinitely perplexing to outsiders. Anyone who has ever dealt with the Illinois operation of a presidential campaign that has imported its top people from other states knows how difficult the transition can be. "They spend the first six months just trying to figure out who they can trust, and they usually choose wrong," groaned one top Democratic strategist recently. "He couldn't find anyone here?" asked several Democratic state legislators about the governor's appointment. Tusk is probably in for a rough ride.

New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg effused about Tusk in a press release issued by the governor's office last week, calling him a "tireless and talented individual who leaves my administration with a strong record of accomplishment." But check out the mayor's Web site and you'll see almost no mention of Tusk, and he's nowhere to be found in the very long online list of "Key Members of the Bloomberg Administration." Bloomberg also hasn't issued a press release yet announcing the allegedly essential Tusk's departure, and the New York media has

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yet to cover the move.

Some of what Blagojevich said about Tusk last week looks a bit like résumé inflation. For instance, according to Blago, Tusk “led” Senator Charles Schumer’s “public efforts to secure over \$20 billion in federal funding to help rebuild New York City in the aftermath of September 11.” Translation: Tusk was Schumer’s press secretary (and NYC is still waiting for most of that 9/11 money). Blagojevich also pointed to Tusk’s successful effort to steer a city-charter revision through a public vote, but the revision was relatively minor and noncontroversial.

Tusk does have some Illinois experience. He graduated from the University of Chicago Law School. From his clips, he also appears to be a bright, accomplished person. But what does it say about the people around Blagojevich that they would choose a 29-year-old New Yorker to be deputy governor of Illinois, when there are obviously far more qualified people right under their noses?

Well, for one thing, it shows the huge power of Blagojevich’s kitchen cabinet. Tusk once worked with lobbyist and Blago insider John Wyma on Senator Schumer’s staff. The governor admitted that Wyma is the guy who hired Tusk, and some now wonder whether lobbyist Wyma will be calling the shots instead of the wet-behind-the-ears Tusk. While Wyma was luring Tusk, he was also reportedly lining up clients to lobby the governor.

It also shows that the governor has become so incredibly insulated that he can’t even reach beyond his tiny inner circle to find a qualified local for such an important position.

And the hiring demonstrates that Blagojevich still doesn’t understand that what he really needs in his office is someone with lots of experience working with Illinois government. They are babes in the woods over there, and, to mix a metaphor, they’re obviously in way over their heads. They claim that by keeping out the people with experience they can better change the state’s political environment. Wrong. The powers that be are gonna eat them alive. Hiring Tusk as deputy governor is like hiring an office clerk to run the war against Iraq.

But, hey, give the kid a chance. One thing’s for sure: He probably can’t make the situation at Blago headquarters much worse than it already is.

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