

Illinois Governor's Administration Becoming a Comedy of Errors

Written by Rich Miller
Tuesday, 01 April 2003 18:00

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The state's new deputy governor, 29-year-old New York native Bradley Tusk, evidently has a lot to learn. Tusk was appointed to the important job not long ago even though he has absolutely no Illinois political experience and has never managed anything larger than a tiny staff.

Tusk, who controls the governor's "message," sent Governor Rod Blagojevich to two firehouses last week to tout the governor's \$10-billion pension bond proposal and pressure the recalcitrant Senate Republicans to vote for the plan. Not a good idea.

The governor admitted under intense questioning that he would not cut state funds for firefighters if the legislature refuses to pass his bond bill, which would free up \$1.9 billion to patch the state's \$4.8-billion deficit.

Reporters asked: So, what, then, was the point of the press conference? Why did the governor surround himself with those firefighters, whose union has no position on the bond bill? The governor told me later that holding the press conferences at the fire stations was a device to attract coverage from reporters. But he's the governor. Reporters will cover him no matter what. Tusk's stunt was cheap.

The governor has repeatedly stressed that the pension bond proposal would allow him to balance the budget, and his budget director, John Filan, has insisted that eliminating the deficit is the administration's first priority. But the governor said in a prepared statement last week that he wanted to use the bond bill to help him increase funding for education, health care, and public safety. Tusk booted that one, too.

Connecting the bond bill to new and/or expanded government programs instead of deficit reduction was a serious mistake. The Senate Republicans have long suspected that the governor is not nearly as interested in budget cuts as he claims. If the Republicans believe that he will use the freed-up cash to spend more money, the governor can probably forget about winning their support any time soon.

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To make matters even worse, Tusk planned to send the governor to Pontiac, Champaign, and Geneseo on Thursday to “seek backing for an innovative pension financing plan that is being considered by the Illinois Senate,” according to a media advisory. The three towns are represented in the Senate by four Republicans, and all of those districts are solidly GOP.

Tusk the New Yorker has probably never heard of this, but a cardinal rule in Illinois politics holds that a statewide officer does not venture into a legislative district to make an incumbent look bad unless it's during a campaign. Legislators are hugely territorial about their home turfs.

So it wasn't much of a surprise that Senator Todd Sieben of Geneseo was furious that the governor had organized a dog-and-pony show in his district without calling him about the bill first.

When told of Sieben's negative reaction, the governor said he would be speaking in Sieben's district about more than just the bond bill – which completely contradicted his media advisory.

When asked whether he had called any of the Republican legislators, particularly Senator Dan Rutherford (R-Pontiac), before scheduling his fly-around, Blagojevich said he hadn't, but admitted that calling him first wasn't a bad idea.

Rutherford was not amused. “To physically appear in my hometown, a half a block from my legislative office, on a day that I physically cannot be present to talk about something legislatively maybe isn't the best way to encourage something to be accomplished,” Senator Rutherford told the Bloomington *Pantagraph*. “The way to work with Dan Rutherford is to pick up the phone and call.”

Blagojevich canceled the events, saying he wanted to be with his pregnant wife, who was due to have her baby at any minute. (Side note: Best wishes to both parents!)

To win this thing, Blagojevich must find a three-fifths majority in the Senate. He has to hold onto all 32 Senate Democrats and one independent (Senator James Meeks) and pick up just three Republican votes. But the governor got an earful Wednesday night when he attended a frank, closed-door meeting with Senate Democrats. The Dems let loose with a few of their complaints about the way he's running his administration.

Some Dems left the meeting believing that the governor had a ways to go before securing unanimous approval of his bond bill.

Tusk has brought a much-needed ability to the governor's office of making actual decisions. But the inexperienced deputy governor needs to get his act together ... fast.

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