



Editorial: At last, overdue reforms

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Before this week, if you talked ethics reform with a politician in Springfield you might as well have been using a foreign language.

For years lawmakers and governors have paid little more than lip service to things like ending the state's destructive pay-to-play culture.

That all changed when Senate President Emil Jones called his senators back to the Statehouse Monday to join the House in overriding a Gov. Rod Blagojevich amendatory veto that had been designed to kill the measure.

The most recent effort dates back to February 2005, when Comptroller Dan Hynes championed a bill that would end high-dollar campaign contributions from companies and individuals who do business with the state. He also banned the practice in his office. So did other constitutional officers. Only Gov. Blagojevich declined to do so and that's not surprising considering how much campaign money he has pocketed from state vendors and other companies with state contracts.

"Today, the people have won," Mr. Hynes said in a statement Monday. "Ending pay-to-play politics in Illinois is the right thing to do and it is LONG overdue. I applaud lawmakers for helping to return Illinois government to the people, where it belongs."

There is an army of people who deserve to take a bow for making these reforms happen and count us among those who were shocked when lawmakers did what they should have done a long time ago.

Pressure from people like Comptroller Hynes and Cindi Canary at the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform, newspaper editorial pages, and reform-minded lawmakers like Rep. John Fritchey and Sens. Don Harmon and Debbie Halvorson kept the heat turned up on leadership. All those pleas might have fallen on deaf ears, however, without a last-minute assist from Sen. Barack Obama. The Democratic presidential candidate appealed directly to Sen. Jones, a political mentor, to call senators back to address the reform effort, which many say was aimed squarely at the governor.

"I think the governor had gotten out of control and this was a direct slap at him," state Sen. Mike Jacobs, D-East Moline, told our Springfield bureau. "Hopefully he understands now you can't give people contracts for \$1 million and then shake contractors down for \$50,000" in contributions.

The governor did himself no favors in trying to kill the legislation, Ms. Canary said. "It was sure a dumb move," she said. "It diminished him in the eyes of many voters."

She's right.

We applaud those who refused to let the measure die and we hope that the success with this reform will spark others. It was clear after Monday's senate action that the watchdog groups aren't finished fixing what's broken. "Unethical officeholders and contractors still will look for ways to game the system," Ms. Canary said, "but better rules will be in place to police contracting and to make it more difficult for favors to be awarded in exchange for campaign funds."

Added Senate Majority Leader Halvorson, "Today, we sent a message loud and clear to the fat cat contributors and to the old boys club in Springfield that it is time for the culture of pay-to-play politics in Illinois to end."

Indeed, it's past time.

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