

Quinn's flip-flops could lead to double-whammy Erosion of support now could hurt bid for 2010 election

By Rick Pearson and Ray Long
Tribune reporters
August 30, 2009

Moments before reversing himself on his second major decision in two days, Gov. Pat Quinn told reporters he believes Illinois residents are happy to have "steady leadership that's getting things done for ordinary people."

The comment came as Quinn bowed to public pressure and vetoed an ethics bill that he had once championed. One day earlier, he had announced he wouldn't follow through on his threat to fire two University of Illinois trustees who refused his demands to resign amid an admissions scandal.

Quinn's actions were the latest in a long series of whiplash moments that began even before he took the chief executive job, following the corruption arrest and January impeachment of ousted Gov. Rod Blagojevich, his two-time Democratic running mate. To his critics, Quinn's dizzying reversals damage the credibility he needs to lead a state awash in troubles.

"We expect [a leader] to take stands, take positions and then stick to them," said Sen. Donne Trotter (D-Chicago). "It's not reassuring to the troops if you are called to advance on a target and then called to retreat. How many times can you do that?"

To Quinn, his evolving positions make perfect sense: They prove he is open-minded and inclusive, following the adversarial tenure of Blagojevich that contributed to disastrous gridlock in state government despite total Democratic control. Quinn says that is what will matter to voters when he seeks a full term in 2010.

"I don't think they look at the comings and the back and forth of politics," Quinn said in an interview after the ethics veto. "I think they kind of see that as political, but the outcomes matter. And the outcome for people in Illinois is they've got a governor who cares for them, who makes decisions every day with their best interests at heart, and I think that's strong leadership."

Others suggest that Quinn -- after years as a self-styled populist who lobbed verbal bombshells with impunity -- has not yet reconciled with a new role in which every word matters.

"His wheels are always turning," said Rep. John Fritchey (D-Chicago), "but sometimes he may need to let the wheels stop spinning before making a statement. I respect that Pat labors over the decisions that he makes, but thinking out loud is a very dangerous proposition for any elected official."

Even in the fractured Springfield statehouse, politicians still regard their word as their bond. It was a fact proven during the Blagojevich era, when distrustful legislators required him to sign the equivalent of political promissory notes to ensure that he made good on his commitments.

Quinn's consistency was called into question even before he rose from the lieutenant governor's office upon Blagojevich's ouster in January.

After federal authorities charged Blagojevich with trying to sell a U.S. Senate seat, Quinn supported at least three different ways to fill it: holding a special election, allowing him to pick a senator if lawmakers booted Blagojevich quickly, and letting him make a temporary appointment before convening a special election.

When Blagojevich appointed Roland Burris to the seat, Quinn called on Burris to quit or face a special election to remove him. But Quinn withdrew his threat amid broad warnings from African-American politicians to lay off the country's only black U.S. senator.

At the start of his seven-month tenure in office, Quinn pushed for quick passage of a public works bill to help create jobs in the recession and promised not to tie it to his push for higher taxes. He then tried to tie his approval of the bill to support for his income-tax hike but once again had to back down.

He proposed a plan to have retired teachers and other state workers kick in more for their pensions, but after being booed at a rally of unionized teachers, he told them he had backed off the idea.

Quinn's veto Thursday of a bill that would have imposed the state's first-ever limits on campaign donations provides a window into his governing style.

First he cut a deal on the bill with Senate President John Cullerton and House Speaker Michael Madigan, the two Chicago Democrats the governor most needs in his corner. He hailed the legislation as "landmark," even though his own reform commission opposed it.

Then, after signaling he would be willing to rewrite the bill to please the critics, he spiked the entire measure with the support of Cullerton and Madigan. Reform groups went along with the Democrats' promise to create a better bill in the fall.

Quinn was out on his own when he backed away from his repeated threats to fire the two U. of I. trustees who refused to resign voluntarily in the wake of the clout admissions scandal the Tribune broke in May. But he attempted to soften the political damage, saying he still would control a majority of the board and he would avoid a costly legal battle with trustees who threatened to sue if fired.

The governor has been a frequent target for Comptroller Dan Hynes, Quinn's Feb. 2 Democratic primary challenger, who contends the governor's flip-flops represent a failure to lead.

If such criticism resonates with voters, Quinn's meandering ways could become a thorny issue, said Charles Wheeler, a former statehouse reporter who teaches at the University of Illinois at Springfield.

"It's kind of inside baseball," Wheeler said, "but it becomes a liability when it allows people to present you as an ineffective leader."

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