

Different governor, same gridlock at Capitol

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CHICAGO — Illinois got a new governor six months ago, but sometimes it seems little else has changed in state government. Officials still snipe at each other, and Illinois is mired in yet another budget deadlock.

Pat Quinn took over as governor amid high hopes for a new, more cooperative attitude at the state Capitol. And that attitude shone through in the weeks after the much-disliked Gov. Rod Blagojevich was booted out of office over corruption charges.

Old patterns emerged, however, as leaders tried to decide how to dig the state out of an \$11.6 billion budget hole.

Quinn lectured lawmakers and painted them as insensitive for backing a budget he said would hurt the state's most vulnerable citizens. Democrats shut out the Republican minority until late in the budget process, and Republicans insisted on a go-slow approach once they were at the table. The House and Senate, though both controlled by Democrats, split over how to handle the budget.

And legislators complained the Democratic governor flip-flops and can't be trusted to stand by what he says.

Some lawmakers see Quinn's inexperience as a big part of Springfield's failures so far this year.

Before his six years as lieutenant governor, a post with few duties, much of Quinn's public life was spent as an activist and organizer — criticizing government but not taking part in the difficult chore of finding agreement among people with major policy differences. He also served as state treasurer.

"He's in the big boy chair, and he's never been in the big boy chair before," said Rep. Jack Franks, a Marengo Democrat.

Quinn's relationship with lawmakers reached a new low last week as he battled unsuccessfully to get the legislature to abandon a budget he felt was irresponsible and instead raise taxes.

He gave a last-minute speech in which he promised to veto the budget and suggested lawmakers weren't acting like adults. It reminded many of Blagojevich's frequent attacks and his much-resented accusation that lawmakers were spending like "drunken sailors."

"It's very sad to me that he took that approach," said Sen. William Delgado, a Chicago Democrat.

Quinn is quick to play down the level of disagreements at the Capitol.

"When you say dysfunction, I think democracy sometimes is messy," Quinn said.

Certainly, the divisions are less severe than they were under Blagojevich, when the governor and House Speaker Michael Madigan essentially refused to be in the same room together.

Quinn argues the only way to balance the budget and protect basic services is to raise income taxes, something most legislators are reluctant to support, especially during a recession. The Senate voted to raise taxes, but the House has refused to go along.

As a result, the legislature wound up simply passing a budget that doesn't come close to covering government expenses and telling Quinn to figure out where to cut. The impasse is similar to some Blagojevich encountered when legislators ignored his ideas for privatizing the state lottery or creating a new business tax.

During Blagojevich's last few years in office, lawmakers got used to working around him because his relations with them had grown so frosty. Now, some see that attitude carrying over to the new governor because Quinn doesn't have the political muscle to change it.

"Quinn is in a similar situation because he was not elected, because he has, by his behavior, come across as weak in relation to the legislative leaders," said Kent Redfield, professor emeritus of political science at the University of Illinois at Springfield.

His behavior includes dropping his proposal to increase pension costs for teachers after they complained, linking a public works program to the state budget after initially saying they were separate and saying he would block major cuts to human services after initially saying legislators were leaving him no choice.

Madigan held a news conference last week in which his central message was that Quinn has damaged his own credibility. "It does not help in this very difficult situation to engage in all these flip-flops," the Chicago Democrat said.

Some wonder about Madigan's motives after he failed to rally Democrats to pass Quinn's tax increase, which Madigan also supports. Madigan's daughter, Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan, is considering a run for Quinn's job, but the speaker denies he's trying to pave the way for her by making things tougher on Quinn.

Quinn wasn't elected to the governor's office, and he doesn't have years' worth of political chits to call in. With an election next year, Quinn also lacks the advantage of being able to remind legislators that he'll be around for years to come.

"I don't think he is being seen as a strong leader right now," Sen. Dan Rutherford, a Republican from Chenoa.

Sen. Don Harmon, D-Oak Park, is willing to give Quinn the benefit of the doubt.

"This would be a difficult task for a governor who'd been in office for 10 years. So for one who's been in for a matter of months and who took the reins suddenly and in a less-than-ideal circumstance, I can't complain," Harmon said. "It's hard to be the governor."

Associated Press writer Christopher Wills in Springfield contributed to this report.

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