

Elected as team, Quinn is now a Blagojevich foe

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SPRINGFIELD -- The political shotgun marriage of Gov. Rod Blagojevich and Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn was never what you'd call blissful. But during Blagojevich's first term, they at least were able to keep up appearances.

No more. In the 18 months since the two Democrats were re-elected together, Quinn has publicly accused Blagojevich of being absent in the fight to lower utility rates. He has helped kill Blagojevich's proposed business tax hike. And he has called him out for failing to back campaign ethics reform.

The ultimate anti-Blagojevich moment may have been Quinn's recent push to create a recall election system, on the grounds that the governor's performance in office has been "a profound disappointment."

With a running mate like this, who needs enemies?

"Your first obligation is to the public," says Quinn, explaining his sharp break with Blagojevich after the two were re-elected together in November 2006. "You need to be a watchdog for the public and not a cheerleader for the governor."

Quinn, long derided in Springfield as a crusader-slash-gadfly, is being taken seriously these days. It's partly because he has smoothed out his rumpled public persona since taking office — and partly because Blagojevich is facing unofficial but increasing talk of impeachment or indictment.

"Had you been here 25 or 30 years ago, I don't think people would have said 'Pat Quinn' and 'governor' in the same sentence," said longtime state Rep. Bill Black, R-Danville. "They do now."

Blagojevich's office didn't respond to requests for comment last week.

In an interview last week, Quinn said he and Blagojevich haven't had a substantive conversation in almost a year. He maintains that's by Blagojevich's choice, and that he views his own string of rebellions lately as "telling a friend what he needs to hear."

He professes not to be trying to replace the beleaguered governor but allows: "In this job, the lieutenant governor, you have to, by definition, always be ready. You never know what will happen."

Others question whether Quinn's relatively new rebellion against Blagojevich might have an element of ambition to it.

"I think he saw an opening ... the same issue most of us see: The governor's having serious legal problems," said state Sen. Mike Jacobs, D-East Moline. "... (Quinn) is trying to separate himself from Gov. Blagojevich in hopes of launching a bid to replace the governor himself."

Quinn, 59, has been lieutenant governor since January 2003, and before that served as state treasurer from 1991 to 1995. But his larger persona in state politics has been as an outsider, rattling the windows.

A Chicago lawyer, he spearheaded the constitutional reduction of the size of the Illinois House in the 1980s, helped found the Citizens Utility Board and took on other petition-passing, consumerist crusades with a headline-grabbing style that has angered politicians for decades.

"He was not viewed favorably by a lot of people," recalled Dawn Clark Netsch, a former Democratic gubernatorial candidate who was the epitome of Illinois' political establishment when Quinn was that establishment's biggest headache.

Netsch was quoted in 1980 suggesting that Quinn should be strung feet-first from the third-floor brass rail in the Capitol rotunda. Her opinion hasn't softened much in the years since.

"The showboating, the press conference every Sunday. ... It was always, 'We're doing it for the people,'" recalled Netsch, now a law professor at Northwestern University in Evanston. "Put it this way: There are other people I would rather see as governor."

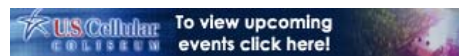
When Quinn won the 2002 Democratic primary for lieutenant governor, he became the automatic running mate of gubernatorial nominee Blagojevich under Illinois' convoluted electoral system. Party candidates for governor and lieutenant governor are nominated in separate elections then paired on the same ballot in the general election, even if they were completely unaffiliated with each other.

The conventional wisdom — ironic in hindsight — was that new star Blagojevich might be hobbled by his forced pairing with gadfly Quinn. But once they were elected together, Quinn surprised people, using the historically

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irrelevant post to promote consumer rights, environmental causes and, especially, support for military veterans.

"He started (as an activist) with these Don Quixote-type missions ... but he's shown himself to be a pretty decent state official," said Charles N. Wheeler, a former longtime correspondent for the Chicago Sun-Times and now director of the Public Affairs Reporting program at the University of Illinois at Springfield.

The trouble began in the second term, when Blagojevich tried to force a massive new business tax through the Legislature to fund health care expansion. Quinn argued the tax would cost jobs and drive up prices

"I wanted to tell him that face to face. ... I tried over and over to get a meeting with him," Quinn recalled last week.

Quinn said he couldn't get that private meeting with Blagojevich. So he publicly testified against the measure before a special hearing of the full House and helped kill it.

Relations went downhill from there.

Blagojevich and his staff, Quinn says, essentially stopped acknowledging his existence. Quinn joined a chorus alleging that Blagojevich's dedication to political reform had collapsed, citing most recently the federal corruption trial of Blagojevich fundraiser Antoin "Tony" Rezko. (Blagojevich hasn't been charged with any wrongdoing.)

In last year's bitter legislative battle over skyrocketing utility rates, Quinn fought for mandated lower rates and was openly critical of Blagojevich's lack of involvement.

This year, the campaign-finance reform and election-recall measures both came to a head. Both were aimed implicitly at Blagojevich, and both featured his own lieutenant governor among their prominent proponents.

In an unintentionally prescient comment before the 2002 election, Blagojevich, trying to calm a crowd of supporters nervous about his controversial running mate, joked that they shouldn't worry because, "When he starts doing his petitions, they're coming my way, not yours."

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