

Illinois's Gov. Pat Quinn faces a daunting to-do list

Blagojevich's replacement, known as populist with an unassuming manner, has inherited a state government in crisis.

By Amanda Paulson | Staff writer / **February 1, 2009 edition**

Call him the anti-Blagojevich.

Whereas Illinois's former governor was a showman who loved the limelight and was known for his bravado and unforgettably coiffed hair, its new one – Pat Quinn – is unassuming and modest, a populist reformer who is usually in the background and has slowly risen through the ranks of Illinois government.

To the people of Illinois, tired of being the butt of national jokes in a nearly two-month ordeal that ended with Rod Blagojevich's conviction on impeachment charges Thursday, that may not be a bad thing.

While Governor Quinn has the advantage of coming into office on a surge of goodwill and without any taint of corruption, he also faces a daunting array of challenges: the worst fiscal crisis in decades, understaffed and poorly staffed agencies, and a government in which the public has lost confidence.

"He faces an incredible challenge because the former governor has left the state in shambles," says Christopher Mooney, a political scientist at the University of Illinois in Springfield, calling Quinn a sort of "wild card."

"How well he'll deal with the budget problem, I don't know," says Professor Mooney. "But government ethics and anticorruption and helping the little guy – that's what Pat Quinn's all about.... And recuperating the image of state government in the eyes of the citizens is almost as important as solving the state budget problems."

Blagojevich was impeached on 13 counts, eight of which had to do with the criminal charges brought against him in December, which alleged that he had tried to sell the US Senate seat vacated by President Obama, had demanded the firing of Chicago Tribune editorial writers in exchange for state help with the sale of Wrigley Field, and had engaged in pay-to-play corruption schemes.

Before he was sworn into office Thursday, Quinn was a rarely seen lieutenant governor who had little to do with Blagojevich.

He has a reputation as a populist, and has conducted several petition drives to change the way things work in Springfield, including a successful bid to reduce the size of the state legislature in the 1980s, which earned him a few enemies among lawmakers. This past year, he campaigned for holding another constitutional convention, a controversial measure that was ultimately defeated at the ballot box.

He has few ties to Illinois machine politics, and has already made clear that cleaning up government will be one of his top priorities.

“We have a duty, a mission to restore the faith of the people of Illinois in the integrity of their government,” he said in remarks following his swearing in. On Friday, he declared a “year of reform,” and said he would push to move the state’s primary back from February to September, since he believes that the focus for now should be governing, rather than campaigning. His first official act as governor was to make the ethics commission he created following Blagojevich’s arrest a permanent body under the governor’s office. He asked the commission for suggestions on cleaning up Illinois politics within 100 days.

But while Quinn seems clear on where he wants to go when it comes to ethics and reform, the bigger challenge may be dealing with the state’s fiscal crises. Illinois faces a budget deficit of around \$4 billion, is behind on payments to healthcare and day-care providers, faces rising unemployment, and has been trying to get a major capital-spending bill passed for some time. A budget is due Feb. 15, though Quinn has asked for a one-month extension.

“The first budget will be simply to get the state government functional again. No one has been willing to make a decision for four or five months now,” says Dick Simpson, a political scientist at the University of Illinois in Chicago and a former Chicago alderman.

“The good news is that he’s been in state government for quite a while, he understands the budget,” says Professor Simpson. It’s less clear how well he’ll be able to work with state lawmakers and how well he’ll be able to manage something as huge as the state government.

“He’ll have a 100-day honeymoon when things can get done,” says Simpson. “After that, there will be inevitable clashes with other political figures.”

Even those who disagree with him on most policy issues acknowledge there’s never been any hint of corruption surrounding Quinn.

“His first political job was on the Cook County Board of Review. That’s an excellent place to get bribes, but my understanding is he was absolutely honest,” says Ann Lousin, a professor at John Marshall Law School and a former Illinois House parliamentarian, who has often found herself on the opposite sides of issues from Quinn over the years.

Professor Lousin is still skeptical about how good a governor he’ll be, and says she hopes he’ll spend more time on the fiscal crisis and less on pet issues like giving people the power of recall. But like many, she’s mostly relieved to see someone new.

People “at this point are saying what somebody said about Gerald Ford: ‘He’s not Richard Nixon,’ ” says Lousin. “At this point, anybody looks good.”