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Topinka, Rutherford Put GOP Back On State's Big Stage

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[By Benjamin Yount Illinois Statehouse News](#)

SPRINGFIELD – Illinois government is no longer an all-Democrat show.

Two of the state's new constitutional officers, Treasurer Dan Rutherford and Comptroller Judy Baar Topinka, are the first Republicans to hold a statewide office in four years. They are also in charge of the state's financial offices, and they say in charge of carrying out the new spending discipline voters chose last fall.

Topinka makes her return to state government as Comptroller. She served a dozen years in both the Illinois House and Senate in the 1980's and 1990's. Topinka was first elected Illinois Treasurer in 1994, she was re-elected twice in 1998 and 2004. She lost in the 2008 race for governor to Rod Blagojevich, and was the last Republican to hold a statewide office.

Topinka told the inauguration audience on Monday that state leaders can't continue to make the former governor the bad guy and blame him for Illinois' \$15 billion budget deficit.

"It would be convenient, and in some cases very satisfying, to blame one party or one administration for the mess that our state is in. But frankly it wouldn't be true because both parties have for a very, very long time helped dig this ditch," said Topinka.

It's not just blame that Topinka says can go around. The new Comptroller said if Illinois is going to fix the budget, everyone is going to have to act like adults.

"It's time to put aside any petty bickering, and certainly any partisan fights, roll-up our sleeves and turn this state around. State government has unfortunately gotten out of touch and out of control, and it is time to bring it back."

Rutherford echoed that, saying he expects each of the players in state government to do their jobs and make the state work.

"I intend to use this statewide stage, and not be an obstructionist with my friends in the legislature or the executive branch of the government. But I am not going to be shy about articulating what I believe is necessary to help the economic standing of [Illinois]."

Rutherford was first elected as a state representative in 1993, he served in the House until he won his Senate seat in 2003.

The new GOP officials campaigned on a pledge to be tighter with the state's checkbook than the Democrats. Rutherford said there is a reason why voters chose Republicans last fall.

"Illinois is faced with a massive, massive financial challenge. Some of it is out of our control. But some of it is been by the makings of Springfield.

Former Republican Governor Jim Thompson said there may be some truth to Topinka and Rutherford's view.

"Republicans have been, in the minds of many voters, been identified as the party with fiscal discipline."

Thompson, served four terms as governor from 1977 to 1991, he adds that Democrats have run the state for the past four years and thinks it'll be good for the state, and the Republican Party, to have new people in office.

"It's healthy to have bi-partisan voices. The legislature is controlled by the Democrats, the governor is a Democrat. It will be helpful for the day-to-day business of government and for the party for those voices to be heard," said Thompson.

Topinka is already piping-up, declaring that she's going to pay the state's bills and stop playing games.

"That means no more arbitrage schemes, pension holidays, binge borrowing, sweeps and raids because none of them have solved our problems. So it's down to just really getting at it."

University of Illinois at Springfield political science professor Kent Redfield said that's exactly what her job is going to be.

"We saw with Dan Hynes what the Comptroller's Office can become, another voice on the budget. The Republicans now have a new voice, and one that carries some weight on fiscal issues.

Redfield adds that the beleaguered Illinois GOP should be very pleased with winning two statewide seats.

Gov. Pat Quinn's office has said for months that it is 'looking forward to working with the new Treasurer and Comptroller,' but the administration is not offering an opinion on the specifics of their comments.