

Albany Times Union

Prodigal son returns

Sen. Pedro Espada Jr. becomes majority leader; Senate back on job

By **JAMES M. ODATO**, Capitol bureau

First published in print: Friday, July 10, 2009

ALBANY -- Saying his actions led to a transformational change that will empower all senators, dissident Democrat Sen. Pedro Espada Jr. rejoined the conference he walked away from a month ago, and returned control of the state Senate to Democrats.

Looking worn out from the battle but speaking with characteristic assertiveness, the prodigal Democrat accepted the post of majority leader -- a promotion sure to anger colleagues who had issues with Espada even before he sided with the GOP on June 8 to create the short-lived "reform coalition."

The Bronx senator pledged cooperation with Sen. Malcolm Smith, D-Queens, whose leadership style Espada had previously criticized as a key reason for his defection.

"We needed this exchange," Espada said of the Senate turmoil. "It happened in public. It happened and it took too long, and I'm sorry."

The senator, who is under investigation by two prosecutorial agencies, equated the bumpy road to unity to a family squabble. "When you in your private life have discord in your family ... you release the most negative energy that you're capable of releasing. You rethink. You come to terms with the truth."

While Smith gave up the title of majority leader, he keeps the post of president pro tempore, the highest post in the Senate. During the coup, Espada claimed the pro tem title, while Sen. Dean Skelos, R-Rockville Center, was named majority leader.

Sen. John Sampson, D-Brooklyn, will remain the Democratic conference leader -- essentially the same rank as Espada; Sen. Jeff Klein, D-Bronx, will be deputy majority leader.

The Democrats codified the leadership changes in an evening session, but essentially sidestepped the question of the legitimacy of the coup by passing a rules change that allowed Smith to name Espada as majority leader.

But when the legislators moved on to address more than 130 bills held up by the stalemate -- including everything from county sales tax extenders to the extension of the Power for Jobs program -- the Republicans staged a protest against what Skelos claimed was Sampson's failure to live up to a commitment to put through a package of reforms the parties had been negotiating during the day.

Around 10 p.m., the Republicans began to move the emergency "non-controversial" legislation to the "controversial" calendar -- where each bill can be subject to two hours of floor debate.

The legislative impasse was broken just before midnight, when the two sides released a joint statement that they had agreed to a framework for reform, and hoped to act on it next week. The chamber then returned to the rapid passage of bills.

The scene was happier earlier Thursday. Standing by Queens Sen. Hiram Monserrate, a coup participant who returned to the Democrats three weeks ago, Espada said Smith was committed to reforming the Senate. Espada insisted he did not negotiate any perks, and simply shook hands on a power-sharing deal.

Sampson's elevation in the conference paved the way for the return of Monserrate, who is under indictment for allegedly assaulting his girlfriend.

But this week, Monserrate and his fellow Democrats Carl Kruger of Brooklyn and Ruben Diaz Sr. of the Bronx had been engaging in very public get-togethers with Espada. The meetings of the so-called "Four Amigos," and their demand that a resolution to the Senate gridlock must be reached by Thursday, raised anxiety levels among the Democratic and Republican camps.

Diaz said the foursome came up with two options to end the stalemate: Espada's return to a reorganized Democratic conference was one possibility; Espada would not divulge the other plan, but a source said it involved the foursome joining Skelos' conference.

A person close to the negotiations said the latter option was taken to Skelos early Thursday. It required giving the Democrats top spots in the GOP-dominated reform

coalition: Espada as president pro tem, Kruger as majority leader, and Skelos as conference leader.

Skelos rejected the proposal, the source said.

"It was never about power, but empowerment," Espada said. He said the reforms he is pushing for would bring about equality for all senators, including the sharing of resources and the ability for legislation to come to the floor more easily.

The deal came together the day after Gov. David Paterson took the legally questionable step of appointing Democratic lawyer and longtime public servant Richard Ravitch as lieutenant governor, potentially providing the Senate with a presiding officer who could give Democrats an advantage. The move is being challenged in court by Espada and the GOP.

Espada said Paterson's actions had no impact on his return to Smith's side.

Asked what is to happen to Senate Secretary Angelo Aponte, who Espada and Monserrate have derided and even taken to court for his refusal to respond to their orders, Monserrate said, "Next question." Senate Democratic officials said Aponte will be keeping his \$190,000 job.

Espada has hired Steve Pigeon, the former Erie County Democratic Committee chairman, as his general counsel. Pigeon also serves as a political operative for Western New York billionaire Tom Golisano, and was a primary architect of the coup.

"I'm not disappointed," Pigeon said about the breakup of the GOP-led coalition.

"We started this because we wanted to bring reform to the Senate," said Pigeon, who said Golisano shared his opinion. "This is the end of three men in a room; it's an empowered minority; this is a great deal for the 19 million New Yorkers. This is going to put pressure on the Assembly to change their rules. I know there's going to be a majority leader who understands all the people of the state."

In his own news conference, Skelos pressed Democrats to embrace the GOP's list of reforms, and did not denounce Espada: "He did what he thought was in his best interest," Skelos said.

Government reform groups say the Democrats' promise to share power with the Republicans must be proven.

"The litmus test will be whether Democrats agree to equality of resources, and what bills they pass," said Blair Horner, legislative director for the New York Public Interest Research Group.

Barbara Bartoletti of the League of Women Voters said the Democrats must also adopt equality of member items, or pork.

Many senators were relieved that a resolution will let them return to some semblance of normalcy after weeks of chaos.

"If you wrote a book about it, nobody would believe it," said Sen. Betty Little, R-Queensbury.