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Paterson Says Legislators Put State in Danger



Nathaniel Brooks for The New York Times

Gov. David A. Paterson after giving his State of the State address.

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ALBANY — In a strikingly blunt State of the State address, Gov. [David A. Paterson](#) chastised the lawmakers seated before him on Wednesday, saying they had spent the state into near-ruin and stood by as a plague of political corruption destroyed New Yorkers' trust in their government.

Dispensing with the ritualized flattery that typically precedes the annual address, Mr. Paterson said that the Legislature's reluctance to make hard decisions and rein in its own excesses had plunged the state even deeper into crisis.

"You have left me and other governors no choice," Mr. Paterson, the former State Senate minority leader, said. "Whether it be by vetoes or delayed spending, I will not write bad checks, and we will not mortgage our children's future."

The public scolding drew a cold response from lawmakers, who gave Mr. Paterson little applause and rose from their chairs only when he entered and exited the Assembly chamber.

Some sat stony-faced during the speech, while others fidgeted with BlackBerrys.

The speech — and its reception — stood in stark contrast to Mr. Paterson’s first speech in the chamber two years ago — after taking office when [Eliot Spitzer](#) resigned — when he earned [thunderous praise from lawmakers](#), whom he charmed with self-effacement and nonstop jokes.

Now, after months of bruising battles with a Legislature resistant to the broad spending cuts that he believes are necessary to save the state, Mr. Paterson’s relationship with his former colleagues could not be more strained.

The governor entered the packed chamber with nary a handshake for the hundreds of lawmakers and other officials who had assembled to hear him speak, and did not crack a single smile during his 30-minute address. Instead, he issued calls for tougher ethics oversight, the abolition of programs he called wasteful and a cap on state spending, often drawing on Biblical language.

“Prosperity hides all manner of sin, but no longer,” Mr. Paterson declared. “We have to rise to the highest expectation of our people and bring them the lasting change they have long, long fought for and desired.”

New York is facing a fiscal crisis decades in the making and a \$7 billion shortfall projected for the coming year. Last year, buoyed in part by federal stimulus aid, state officials increased total spending by nearly 9 percent, even as the economy faltered and revenues plummeted.

Lawmakers, Mr. Paterson charged, had too often bowed to the wishes of powerful special interests, feeding an “addiction to spending, power and approval” and plunging the state into economic catastrophe.

“No longer are we going to run New York like a payday loan operation,” the governor vowed.

Referring to industry and labor lobbyists in the chamber, he declared, “The moneyed interests — many are here today as guests — have got to understand that their days of influence in this town are numbered.”

But after warning lawmakers for months of the state's impending fiscal ruin, Mr. Paterson seemed determined to offer hope as well as caution, suggesting that state officials now had an opportunity to restore New York to glory.

"There is still time to rebuild the Empire State," Mr. Paterson told the lawmakers. "Work with me, follow me, so that New York can turn the corner."

Mr. Paterson's ethics proposals are the most ambitious ever offered by a New York governor, and would not only set term limits for all lawmakers and statewide officials, but also ban corporate campaign contributions, reduce individual contribution limits from a maximum of \$55,900 to \$1,000, and require all lawmakers to disclose all their outside sources of income.

The governor also proposed new policies aimed at spurring job creation and economic development, especially in the beleaguered upstate region. Chief among Mr. Paterson's goals is scrapping the scandal-plagued Empire Zone program of business tax breaks and replacing it with new one, called the Excelsior Jobs program, that would focus on high-tech development and so-called green jobs.

With statewide elections less than a year away, and his own future as uncertain as New York's finances, Mr. Paterson's speech carried an inevitable subtext — not least because he delivered his remarks with Attorney General [Andrew M. Cuomo](#), his likely challenger in the Democratic primary, standing just a few feet away on the dais.

"Some say that we will not succeed — that the story has already been written and the ending is ordained," Mr. Paterson told the lawmakers, a thought that might just as easily be applied to the widespread belief among fellow Democrats that he cannot win election as to pessimism about the state's finances. "But story lines change, and people change."

Mr. Cuomo said that the governor "hit most of the right issues. It's about ethics reform, there's no doubt, it's about fiscal reform. The trick for us this year is actually getting it done."

Mr. Paterson's remarks drew quick praise from business groups and budget hawks. But some Democratic lawmakers expressed resentment at Mr. Paterson's finger-wagging.

“The people want statesmen to fix our problems, not politicians who ascribe blame without offering a solution,” Senator [John L. Sampson](#), the Democratic leader in the State Senate, said, adding: “We have to put aside our differences. We don’t have to like one another, but we need to respect one another.”

The Assembly speaker, [Sheldon Silver](#), who has shied away from criticizing Mr. Paterson in public, was less direct, suggesting that the governor’s priorities were misplaced and that the state should be focusing on creating jobs above all else.

Neither Mr. Sampson nor Mr. Silver commented directly on the governor’s call for an ethics overhaul, a centerpiece of his address. Though the proposals were spelled out in detail in a briefing book distributed after the address, both men said they could not comment until they had seen draft legislation from Mr. Paterson.

Notably, most of the praise for the governor’s remarks came from Republicans. [Edward F. Cox](#), the state [Republican Party](#) chairman, said Mr. Paterson delivered “a Republican message of fiscal responsibility and capping spending.”

Most of Mr. Paterson’s applause also came from Republicans, who have been shut out of power since losing control of the State Senate last year, but have high hopes that public outrage over taxes and spending will propel them back this fall. But Republican leaders also suggested that Mr. Paterson had talked about fiscal restraint more than he had delivered on it.

“Last year, he gave a similar speech and promised to hold the line on spending and not raise taxes,” said Senator [Dean G. Skelos](#), the Republican minority leader.

“Unfortunately, that did not happen. Along with his Democrat colleagues in the Senate and Assembly, the governor approved a budget that included record increases in spending.”

Some Democrats were more receptive to Mr. Paterson.

“I thought he gave the speech of his life,” said Assemblyman Keith L. T. Wright, a Harlem Democrat and one of the governor’s staunchest allies in the Legislature.

“Whether you agree with him or not, you know where he’s going.”