

By Ken Hall

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Ken Hall: Budget process keeps same corrupt system

New York legislators have been passing fewer laws in recent years than they used to. That's because much of the work that used to be done by those individual laws has been rolled into the state budget, a document that was 577 pages in 1969 but grew to 2,890 in 2012.

If you compare the way we cover Congress to the way we cover the state Legislature, one stark difference is in the tabulation of voting records. You'll find many sources and rankings based on the way your member of Congress votes, often going down to the committee level. While you can look at some votes in the state Assembly and Senate, it won't tell you much because so much of what matters is in that large budget package with so many important details negotiated out of sight in the last months of the session, then presented to the legislators for approval along party lines in both chambers.

For all of the talk about needing to change things in Albany, for all of the complaints that a state should not be run by three men in a room, there is no indication that the budget for the next fiscal year will be treated any differently.

Consider the talk this week about funding state aid to education. There were three figures floating around,: \$1.1 billion, \$1.8 billion, \$1.9 billion from the governor, the Assembly Democrats and the Senate Republicans.

Around April 1, we should have a final figure, along with the breakdown of how much each district gets. Local schools then will know if they guessed right in spending plans going up for public approval with little time for adjustments.

Final school figures will depend on secret bargains, with some related to education, such as teacher evaluations, and some not, such as the pay and perks of legislators,

As the budget deadline nears, as discussions move from committee hearings and the floor of the two chambers to the private meetings among the three leaders, we will no longer be able to watch what happens. We will never know, for example, who agreed to add some school money in return for a bit more leeway on charter schools, who was able to get more for one region at the expense of another.

Those who long have been advocates for more open government in New York got a boost this winter when the federal prosecutor probing corruption in Albany joined good government forces in lamenting the idea that three men in a room wield so much power over the state. But even with a new man replacing one removed, perhaps temporarily, to face indictments over bribery and corruption, the system is intact.

In fact, it might be stronger than ever. Those who were encouraged by the indictment of Sheldon Silver need to understand that while he played an important part, it really was just a part and he was just one of a trio of characters in a script that remains unchanged.

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