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EDITORIAL

## Fed Up With Albany

New Yorkers have been complaining for many years about their abysmal state government, but it has simply grown worse. The state has become a national embarrassment, a swamp of intrigue and corruption, a \$131 billion monster controlled by a crowd of smug officials whose main concern is keeping their soft jobs. By now, most New Yorkers have given up hope that these officials are capable of cleaning up their own mess.

The clock is ticking. In one year, unless the Albany crowd pulls off some miracle, which we doubt will happen, it will be up to the voters to get them out, all of them.

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To recap some recent outrages:

Former Gov. Eliot Spitzer, who promised to reform Albany on Day One, was forced to resign on Day 441 after his bizarre antics with a prostitute. His replacement, David Paterson, has been weak and ineffective. The state comptroller was forced to resign after confessing to a felony involving his misuse of state resources. Three of his close associates have been arrested on charges of bribery and grand larceny.

A dozen legislators in the last few years have been convicted of serious crimes including bribery, mail fraud, extortion and racketeering. Joseph Bruno, the Senate majority leader who resigned last year, is fighting federal charges that he collected more than \$3 million in fees from companies trying to do business with the state.

After failing to do the people's business for years, the Senate was shut down for a month this summer by two Democratic senators. Pedro Espada Jr., one of them, is under investigation for not filing campaign finance forms and over allegations that he funneled state money into his own business. The other, Hiram Monserrate, was convicted last week of assaulting his girlfriend.

How do we let such people anywhere near a legislature? The answer is in voters' hands. It is time to change the culture.

In coming weeks, we will outline some of the ways this inbred system allows so many lawmakers to abuse the public trust, and how new faces in Albany could change it. Our goals are to make a once-respected state run better and more openly, to make elections fairer and more competitive, and to create a more ethical government with tougher rules and real enforcement.

**ALBANY NEEDS ADULT SUPERVISION** In 2007, under Mr. Spitzer, the state passed changes to its ethics laws that fell far short of genuine reform. Two agencies that monitored ethics and lobbying were merged into one ethics commission, which in classic Albany fashion resulted in the firing of David Grandeau, one of the few people brave enough to go after lobbyists and legislators. The good-government types called him

Albany's Eliot Ness.

A year after the Spitzer reform, a top official for the new ethics commission was accused of being unethical. He allegedly passed information about an ongoing investigation of Mr. Spitzer's office to one of Mr. Spitzer's aides. What made this troubling was that as governor, Mr. Spitzer had appointed a majority of the new ethics commission members, just as lawmakers control the group that polices them.

New York needs independent monitors with powers to oversee the ethics of those in the state government and Legislature.

**STOP THE SEWER MONEY** New York's campaign finance laws are notoriously loose, allowing unions, businesses and the wealthy to have their way with Albany. An individual can give only \$4,800 to a candidate for president, but \$55,900 to a candidate for governor. Write a check to a New York political party for "housekeeping" and it can have as many zeroes as you like. Those fattened political parties can give unlimited amounts to candidates.

Even worse, the loose limits are paired with looser enforcement. One assemblywoman has been fined 63 times for not filing any campaign contribution data for over a decade.

Finally, New York politicians can use campaign money for almost anything — funds have been used for pool covers, country club dues and even legal fees after the lawmaker has left office to do time in jail. The New York State Board of Elections is supposed to monitor those expenses, but as a spokesman for the board told one reporter: "Unless you out-and-out stick it in your pocket and walk away, everything's legal."

The goal should be public financing of campaigns like the system in Connecticut, and strict rules for reporting and using that money. New York City's rules are a good model.

**IT SHOULDN'T BE SO EASY TO HIDE \$131 BILLION** The state budget is deliberately opaque. A few officials — mostly bureaucrats — have attempted over the years to explain what's going on, but nobody in Albany is really trying to put a budget online, so even those knowledgeable about finance can't read it.

Details are guarded like state secrets. Want to know how much taxpayers spend on roads downstate? Forget it. How much do they spend on Sing Sing prison? That's not in the public data. It's time to make the state budget an open book — at least as open as New York City's.

**THE STATE'S \$116 BILLION INVESTOR** New York's comptroller is the sole trustee watching over \$116.5 billion in pension investments. This should not be happening anywhere, but especially not in Albany.

Attorney General Andrew Cuomo has proposed a 13-member commission to manage pensions. The idea is a good one, requiring appointments to the board by state leaders and employees with pensions. But this new board should not become another parking place for political hacks. While we need a better system than one person controlling so much money, it must be done right — with a board picked for its financial expertise with fiduciary duties to protect the pension.

**FAIR ELECTIONS SHOULD NOT BE SO HARD** New York's lawmakers have made voting and running for office notoriously difficult. Registration to vote should be automatic. Elections should not be an income source for sleazy lawyers whose business is bumping candidates off ballots. It's time to open the polls to more voters and expand opportunities for more candidates.

**THE MAPMAKING SCANDALS** Every 10 years New York lawmakers draw their own districts, so legislators pick neighborhoods or communities they know are on their side, a process that is often unfair to New Yorkers, since the politicians' trick is to match the voters to the incumbents, rather than force candidates to consider the interests of their voters.

The maps are so bizarre that one upstate district has been nicknamed "Lincoln riding a vacuum cleaner" because of the way it looks as it reaches here and there to pick up enough friendly voters for a one-size-fits-one-party district. If there is one change that could make a real difference, an independent commission serving as the state's fair mapmaker for the Legislature would be it.

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In many states, reform only comes when people are truly ashamed of their lawmakers and vote them out of office. New York's moment of shame is now.

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