

'Groundhog Day': Another scandal rocks Albany

*Written by Joseph Spector Albany Bureau Chief
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ALBANY — Three of the last five state Senate majority leaders have been indicted or are in jail for corruption. At least 26 state lawmakers have dealt with ethical problems or criminal charges since 2000.

On Tuesday, another scandal rocked the state Capitol when former Senate Majority Leader Malcolm Smith, D-Queens, was charged with being the ringleader in a bribery scandal to get the Republican nomination for New York City mayor.

Manhattan U.S. Attorney Preet Bharara said the case is indicative of a brazenness of New York politicians and a lack of transparency and oversight in government.

“From time to time the question arises: How common is corruption in New York?” Bharara said Tuesday. “Based on the cases we have brought and continue to bring, it seems downright pervasive.”

Smith was among five officials and leaders in Spring Valley, Rockland County, charged in the bribery scheme.

Bharara has handled a number of the recent corruption cases, leading to prison sentences for former Hudson Valley Sens. Nick Spano and Vincent Leibell, both Republicans, and Sen. Carl Krueger, D-Brooklyn.

“Every time a politician is arrested in New York, it should not feel like a scene from Groundhog Day. And yet it does,” he said.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo called Smith’s arrest “serious allegations,” and said, “We have zero tolerance of any violation of the public integrity and the public trust.”

Cuomo prosecuted corruption cases as attorney general from 2007 through 2010, including the pay-to-play pension scandal involving former Comptroller Alan Hevesi and his cronies.

Hevesi was released last December after serving 20 months in prison. He was released early after he admitted that he thought he wouldn’t be caught.

“I got arrogant,” Hevesi said during his parole board hearing last November. “I was a big shot in my own head.”

A report in 2011 by Citizens Union, a good-government group, found that 17 state legislators either left office or lost their seat due to ethical and criminal issues between 1999 and 2010.

The report is already old, with at least a half dozen lawmakers facing trouble since then.

Last month, Assemblyman Steve Katz, R-Yorktown, Westchester County, was ticketed for marijuana possession. He serves on the Assembly Committee on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse and voted against the legalization of medical marijuana.

Cuomo has promised to rid the state Capitol of the dysfunction that preceded him. In 2008, Gov. Eliot Spitzer resigned amid a prostitution scandal.

Cuomo and lawmakers installed a new ethics commission, but the panel has been widely panned.

Larry Levy, executive dean of National Center for Suburban Studies at Hofstra University, said Smith and the others are entitled to a presumption of innocence, but the case shows that New York hasn't remedied its ethics woes.

Smith was stripped of his leadership positions Tuesday, and the placards that listed his posts were quickly removed from outside his Albany office.

"It clearly shows that New York still has a ways to go before it can say that the dysfunction is truly done and all the thieves and charlatans have been tossed from the building," Levy said.

Albany's history of scandal was even highlighted in the critically acclaimed movie "Lincoln" last year.

Secretary of State William Seward, a former New York governor and U.S. senator, told President Lincoln in the movie that he would call people from Albany to bribe members of Congress to pass a law abolishing slavery.

"If procuring votes with offers of employment is what you intend, I'll fetch a friend from Albany who can supply the skulking men gifted at this kind of shady work," Seward, played by David Strathairn, told Lincoln, played by Daniel Day-Lewis.

JSPECTOR@Gannett.com