

NEW YORK POST

The root of Albany evil: Cuomo blames 'power' of entrenched leaders

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Chad Rachman/NY Post **Gov. Andrew Cuomo: 'power establishment' to blame for corruption scandals.**

Gov. Cuomo yesterday shifted blame for New York's political-corruption crisis to a "power establishment" that includes Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver and other entrenched members of the state Legislature.

During an interview with The Post's editorial board, Cuomo was asked about Manhattan US Attorney Preet Bharara's criticisms that New York's leaders were condoning public corruption by turning a blind eye to it.

"It's been going on for 20 years. That's where I think the Post story came from today," Cuomo said, referring to Fredric U. Dicker's column that the governor and his team discussed ousting Silver from the powerful speaker post he's held since 1994.

"The power establishment has been there a long time. I think that's what [Bharara] was saying," the governor said.

Bharara last week condemned New York politics, saying corruption is "rampant" in the state as he charged three elected officials and party leaders in bribery scams.

Yesterday, Cuomo expounded on that notion, saying there are too many rotten apples in Albany because the state capital's bad reputation and incumbent-driven political culture discourages the best and brightest from running for office, and instead attracts lesser lights or hacks tied to political party leaders.

"Why aren't we electing better people? I think about it. There has been a degradation of state government across the board. This is a long generation up there. Ten, 15 years. New York state government. Nobody wanted to go," Cuomo said.

"If you wanted to go into government, you went to Washington or New York City. You didn't go to Albany. Are we paying a price for that? Maybe so.

"Every nine months or a year or so, you've had high-level elected officials, stupid, venal politicians getting themselves in trouble. It's a story of power and greed."

Cuomo's comments come a week after state Sen. Malcolm Smith (D-Queens), Councilman Dan Halloran (R-Queens) and two city Republican party leaders were charged in a bribery scheme to allegedly give Smith access to the GOP ballot.

Days later, Bronx Assemblyman Eric Stevenson was indicted in a separate bribery sting for allegedly drafting legislation-to-order for businessmen willing to fork over cold hard cash. The feds used corrupt Assemblyman Nelson Castro, who cooperated with the prosecution, to bust Stevenson.

During the 75-minute interview yesterday, Cuomo vowed to fight for legislation aimed at curbing the seemingly non-stop corruption in the scandal-scarred Legislature. Cuomo maintained that Bharara was criticizing the legislative leadership for corruption, the governor insisted, however, he was not plotting to topple Silver. Nor did he hold him alone responsible for the latest scandal.

"We're going to use [the crisis] to push forth a very aggressive reform package. We're going to put forth electoral reform, campaign reform. We've been talking about this for years and years," he said.

The governor said he wants to help curb or eliminate pay-to-play politics by reducing the large campaign contributions that donors can pump into lawmakers' campaigns.

"In this state, you have high campaign contribution limits. The potential for abuse is higher . . . It's worse because of the amount of money [involved]," he said.

Cuomo also said he wants to repeal the law — known as Wilson-Pakula — that allows county party leaders to decide whether members of another political party can run on its ballot. The alleged selling of the GOP ballot is at the heart of the Smith bribery scandal.

"Something has to be done about Wilson-Pakula and cross-endorsements. You have mayoral candidates that are talking about this outwardly, about what they have to do to get on the ballot. That whole electoral process stinks and has for a long time. I think there's an opportunity to reform that," he said.

"In an ideal world," he said, "you'd have no cross endorsements."

New York is one of few states where you have influential minority parties such as the Working Families Party on the left and the Conservative Party on the right that cross endorses candidates from other parties.

"The Legislature picks the head of the Legislature. That's not my role to get involved in," he said.

A Silver spokesman declined comment.

Additional reporting by Erik Kriss and Fredric U. Dicker

EXCERPTS FROM POST EDITORIAL Q & A WITH GOV. CUOMO

Q: What are your day-to-day challenges?

A: The dominance in Albany for many, many years by special interests. Entities that have a vested interest in the budget and the outcome of the budget. And they dominate Albany. Political contributions, power, control.

Q: What do you think are the next steps to taking on corruption?"

A: We're going to use it to push forth a very aggressive reform package . . . We're going to put forth an electoral reform, a campaign-reform package . . . Every nine months or a year or so, you've had high-level elected officials, stupid, venal politicians getting themselves in trouble. It's a story of power and story of greed.

Q: What about the stuff that isn't corrupt that's allowed? We're thinking of the wine bill. Nothing illegal, but . . . you've got legislation that favors one guy's businesses over other businesses and there's campaign contributions.

A: What aggravates it is the high campaign limit. In this state, you have very high campaign limits. The potential abuse is higher in that regard When most people got into trouble is with member items. It was their access to real money. The member items only exist on the city side now.

Q: Can you address our front-page story today about the coup on Shelly Silver?

A: First, much of this case was about New York City, as opposed to Albany. Senator Malcolm Smith was from Albany, so the focus was on Albany. On the Assembly side, you had two Assembly people. But these were people who are acting purely in their own personal capacity. I don't see how you lay that at the footstep of Sheldon Silver. They knew the law.

Q: What do you think of [US Attorney] Preet Bharara's comment that New York political leaders turned a blind eye to corruption?

A: His point was basically correct. There is corruption in New York politics. Hevesi, Espada, Brian McLaughlin, Efrain Gonzalez. There is a long line. And I don't know if you add up the statistics, I don't know if New York is any worse than any other state. My guess is we're probably better than most other states. But there is no doubt that there is power, that there's money and there's greed .

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