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Linda Joy Sullivan: It's someone's victory, at a to-be determined cost

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By Linda Joy Sullivan

We will have to wait some months to see who the "winner" will be of this month's budget debacle in Montpelier. The way I handicap it, Gov. Phil Scott will probably have the upper hand going into this year's election cycle as far as "messaging" is concerned. The Legislature has the far more difficult task in communicating what was at stake and in defending its actions, and particularly in explaining the disturbing maneuvering during the last days of the special session.

As for whether Vermonters have been best served by the budget that was actually passed, it can be argued either way. One thing is certain: nothing was done in the fray that will foster public confidence in our legislative and budgeting processes.

Gov. Scott arguably has the much easier to understand campaign message: *I promised no new taxes and I almost got there. In a year where we had a budget surplus of \$55 million, the legislature promised a shutdown unless we raised property taxes. Go figure. I stuck to my guns and vetoed that plan twice — but enough was enough, I couldn't hurt Vermonters by vetoing the budget a third time at risk of closing our government. Simple enough.*

The legislature's message back can only be described as much more obscure and harder for voters to understand. *Yes, there was a surplus, but we thought it imprudent to spend 'one-time' money to defray a property tax increase. We would just build for ourselves a larger 'budget hole' next year. Fiscal responsibility required us to stick to our guns even if it meant shutting down the state.* Leaving to individual legislators the task of explaining to constituents what all that talk about one-time funds and budget holes really means, and why the Legislature effectively insisted that taxes go up, will be no easy assignment. That's not to say the Legislature was wrong, but it's a mouthful of an explanation.

What was particularly maddening about the last few weeks is that there were, in my view, no compelling public policy issues at stake. The Governor's education reform proposals that caused the initial uproar had been taken almost entirely off the table, to be resolved another day. While transparency is a noble objective, the decision by legislative leadership to spurn offers at direct negotiation about highly technical money issues seemed a sure recipe for the sort of brinksmanship and posturing that ultimately developed.

Also, while fiscal responsibility is certainly a virtue, no one was much talking at the end of this process about the fact that the Senate and House budgets actually dedicated a good portion of the newly available one-time funds to an increase in the public underwriting of recurring program costs. In this year of surpluses, no one needed to talk about forgoing important mental health program expenditures even if those costs might indirectly contribute to the "hole" next year. But it seems a bit insincere to claim the fiscal high road when one-time funds were allocated for what certainly will be non-one-time costs (i.e., increase spending for salaries and administrative expenses, neither of which can realistically be rolled back in next year's budget).

What was hardest to swallow, though, was how hard a number of my colleagues worked at coming up with a compromise to break the impasse, only to have the work abandoned at the last minute by leadership — primarily, in most everyone's view, to achieve partisan legislative unity between the Senate and the House, simply in order to increase the legislature's supposed "leverage" over the Governor.

On Friday of last week, my House colleagues and I came to work sincerely committed to coming up with a solution that would both responsibly serve Vermont while avoiding a government shutdown. By midday we actually achieved a solution that was, when communicated to Gov. Scott, acceptable to him. A deal was struck. Literally, I am told, there was a handshake.

However, it took only a few hours for the House to abandon entirely its deal with the Governor, apparently at the adamant insistence of the Senate president pro tempore, who demanded that the Senate version of the budget had to be passed no matter the independent work and wisdom of the House. Still, by mid-afternoon we were back at trying again, and again we achieved a compromise between House Republicans, Democrats and Progressives.

The members of the so-called money committees — Appropriations and Ways and Means — met and unanimously approved this second proposal. Each party then had extended "caucuses" in the early evening so that all members could understand the new deal that was struck before being called to the

floor of the House to vote on the measure.

Yet, to everyone's surprise, after the caucuses had been completed and while we were seated and preparing to vote, we were told, without much of an explanation and without anyone going back to the money committees, that the second compromise of the day was also effectively to be scuttled. It seems that the second compromise of the day was also not acceptable to the Senate president pro tempore. With no debate of any substance, my colleagues took their lead from legislative leadership and erased their work, effectively approving the Senate's version. So much for our 17-hour, bipartisan compromise-driven efforts. "Legislative leverage" was the order of the day. In the process, "transparency" apparently became inexpedient.

The legislature is a hard place to work — the hours are long, the demands many, the compensation little. I have been chagrined this year to hear announcement after announcement by a number of my colleagues — decent, strong, well-meaning legislators — that they had determined not to seek re-election. Each had deeply personal reasons, to be sure. I cannot but wonder, nonetheless, whether the predominance of partisan pressure on individual members and the use of sometimes questionable tactics doesn't extract a huge toll.

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