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COMMENTARY

Linda Sullivan: Impasse is more institutional than partisan

By **Commentary**

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Editor's note: This commentary is by Rep. Linda Joy Sullivan, of Dorset, a Democrat who represents the Bennington-Rutland District in the Vermont House of Representatives and is a member of the House Committee on Commerce and Economic Development.

On an off day for the Legislature I decided to drive up to Montpelier to sit in on a public meeting the governor arranged with its finance and management commissioner and the state economist to discuss FY 2018 revenue projections. I understand that the meeting was scheduled in lieu of an E-board meeting with the governor that the Legislature decided not to attend. I suspect that some of my colleagues in the Legislature believe the impromptu internal session was a staged political event, even partisan grandstanding. Still, I wanted to hear more about our revenue projections and to better educate myself. I came because I am interested in contributing towards a positive dialogue directed at getting past the current impasse between our Legislature and the governor on the budget.

I get frustrated by the rhetoric advanced by some that the current budget crisis boils down to an exercise of raw partisan politics prompting an apparent instinct by some to just dig in and fight this out to the end. I see it differently. While the current impasse on fiscal issues needs to be overcome and overcome soon, there doesn't seem to be core partisan policy issues at stake. The current disagreement can easily be overcome with a shared commitment to compromise and prompt resolution. Not every impasse involves "partisan" disagreement that need to be fought to the end. Not every impasse is a bad one.

Woven into the fabric of our centuries' old government — it's written right in the Vermont Constitution — is the notion that the Legislature gets

the first crack at passing law, while the governor has the corresponding right later to say that a law that has been passed is improvident. If the Legislature disagrees, and has enough support to override a veto, the Legislature is able to tell the governor, “Too bad, this is going to be the law in Vermont.” If the Legislature can’t muster support to override a veto, it needs to try a different approach. It’s that simple.

I don’t see anything in the current budget impasse that implicates fundamental policy concerns that break along “party” lines. At risk of oversimplification, the Legislature says that it believes we need to use one-time money to spend down teacher pensions. The governor disagrees that this is the right choice for Vermont today — he favors using the funds to deflect a property tax increase.

To me, this budget controversy largely boils down to an economic issue that reasonable people can disagree about. In this instance — not involving social spending programs or any other identifiable and emotionally charged policy issues on which Democrats and Republicans not infrequently disagree (e.g., abortion, gun rights, union protections, minimum wage) — how one comes out on the economic decision as to how, if at all, Vermont spends its newly “found money” doesn’t naturally divide on party lines. A Democratic governor could disagree with a Democratic legislature on the issue. A Republican governor could do the same with a Republican legislature. It’s a disagreement not so much between parties but between branches of government that have a constitutional right to stake out positions that conflict.

That’s an *institutional* conflict. As far as I can see, the only thing that makes any of this “partisan” and a *political* conflict is that the Legislature in Vermont is controlled by the Democrats and the governor is a Republican. The current impasse seems to me to be largely a question dominated by consideration of who — which party — is going to “win” over what is the correct, most prudent fiscal policy choice. Whether Republican or Democrat, each side should be allowed to make substantive arguments around an institutional impasse without being labeled cynically “partisan,” interested only in winning so as to advance larger political agendas. I’d suggest that disagreement over issues that center on fiscal responsibility can only be viewed as healthy. These are the sorts of disagreements our Constitution explicitly allows to occur as essential to good government.

If what we’re talking about is the right “flavor” of fiscal conduct is the better choice for Vermont, I am puzzled over why we are headed for this shutdown. We have been in special session for almost four weeks and I am just not seeing any significant movement from either side. I am confident we will get to a deal. Neither side wants a shutdown. We can’t just leave this issue for resolution on June 29 and 30. The public loses confidence in its institutions when these sorts of stalemates happen. We need to avoid that.

I see absolutely no reason why both sides haven’t sequestered themselves and started the quiet, direct and focused negotiations necessary to resolve these issues right now. That’s what this is going to take. There is no need for this to languish for three more weeks.

Many of my colleagues in the Legislature are having to put aside family and business commitments while we wait for this to get sorted out. Much more importantly, Vermont workers, businesses and our municipal governments are left in doubt about what lies ahead. This, in my opinion, is all unnecessary. The issues are really not that complicated.

Given that we can’t seem to get both sides on the issue in the same room together to hash this out, some of my colleagues, like Rep. Cynthia Browning, have individually worked through their committees to advance proposals to break the current logjam. I support those efforts. Hopefully that work will inspire leadership on both sides of this impasse to develop the sharper vision necessary to achieve a prompt resolution.

As for today’s session: I learned a lot. I hope to get to use that knowledge soon.



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