

News

After Bruno verdict, state lawmakers fear widespread sense of corruption

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STATE lawmakers from the Mid-Hudson Valley said on Tuesday that the perception of a pervasive culture of corruption among power brokers in Albany is only deepened by the conviction of former state Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno on charges he used his office for personal gain.

Assemblyman Joel Miller said the Bruno trial and other investigations have demonstrated the ability of lawmakers in leadership positions to abuse their authority.

"There is no excuse, it is too easy to do it, and my fear is that he is not alone — it is incredibly widespread," said Miller, R-Poughkeepsie. "Bruno (a fellow Republican) is no friend of mine or a friend of those people who are legitimate politicians. There should be zero tolerance for this type of corruption. ...

"I'm talking about when they violate the public trust by giving contracts, giving benefits to those that pay them," Miller said. "That creates an unlevel playing field. It costs the taxpayers far more money than it should, and it corrupts the entire business dealings that states have to do, or counties have to do, or towns have to do, with the business community."

Miller said it "requires the vigilance of those people outside the legislative body" to fight corruption.

Asked whether it was a concern that Bruno was one of the "three men in a room" during budget discussions, Miller said: "Oh, yeah — and what makes anyone think it's different now?"

Assemblyman Marcus Molinaro said Bruno's conviction is troubling when consider how many years the Senate leader was responsible for state budget decisions.

"Having three leaders (the governor, Senate majority leader and Assembly speaker) negotiate complex legislative matters is not the problem," said Molinaro, R-Red Hook. "The problem is that then the votes are almost guaranteed. There is no open democratic structure in the Legislature. It's not that just that those three people are in the room negotiating; it's that they have absolute and supreme power over the democratic process, and that is a corrupting influence and it is the very heart of what's wrong in Albany."

Assemblyman Clifford Crouch said there should be a review of how state legislation has been affected by the self-interests of Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, D-Manhattan.

"There are certain things (for which) we need to have transparency if there is some way that your position in the real world could be potentially in conflict," said Crouch, R-Guilford. "I look at attorneys as maybe representing conflicts. I question sometimes (that) we've got the speaker of the Assembly that is a member of law firm, and everybody knows that anything with tort reform gets held in committee. To me, that's a conflict."

Crouch said he would have no problem "divulging my association with anything that's out there," but he recommended that the currently required financial disclosure statements be more specific.

"We fill out an ethics statement every year, and obviously the numbers in there are ballpark numbers, they are brackets," he said. "In general, I think that's a pretty good tool. Maybe we should narrow those brackets down."

Crouch said he and his wife sold a retail business about five years ago.

"Before I even got into the Assembly, I was an owner-operator of a dairy farm," he said. "Obviously, there is not a lot of favor you can gather."

Assemblyman Frank Skartados said he has sought legal advice on questionable meetings during the 11 months he has served in the Legislature.

"A number of times, I was approached by local businesses and corporations who may not like the way I attacked them for unfairness," said Skartados, R-Marlborough. "They may say to you, 'We'll try to help you out.'"

Skartados said there "two instances where I had to question myself and in fact did go to the Assembly counsel and ask for advice. What they told me was what I thought, what I believed, which was basically this doesn't look good, this doesn't smell good, therefore stay away from it."

"I think if we do seek the advice of counsel, it will prevent us from falling into the same trap as Mr. Bruno did," he said.

Skartados said the scope of state government is a lot to learn in 11 months, but he would welcome an outside review of complaints of conflicts among lawmakers.

"We are all in agreement that we need stronger ethics laws, and the idea of having outside auditing or oversight is something I would support," Skartados said.

Assemblyman Peter Lopez was concerned that other government agencies would not be taken seriously in reviewing complaints against state lawmakers, citing the scandals that brought down former Gov. Eliot Spitzer and former state Comptroller Alan Hevesi, both Democrats.

"(The process) should be open so that anyone in society could raise the objection or initiate an investigation if they feel someone has overstepped their authority," said Lopez, R-Schoharie.

ASSEMBLYMAN Kevin Cahill said he hopes "we can go back and finish the ethics law changes we started a couple of years ago."

Bruno "was convicted of two counts, not all seven. The jury saw a problem. They weren't quite able to identify the problem, and I think a portion of that problem is attributable to the nature of our ethics laws," said Cahill, D-Kingston, a member of the Assembly Committee on Ethics and Guidance..

"When we tried to change them two to three years ago, we ran into some compromises," Cahill said. "Now at least some of those hurdles will be out of the way and we will be able to finish the job."

State Sen. John Bonacic, R-Mount Hope, was not immediately available for comment, but he issued a press release saying Bruno verdict was a "clarion call for stronger, non-partisan ethics laws and enforcement."

State Sen. Stephen Saland, R-Poughkeepsie, did not return a reporter's phone message on Tuesday.

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