And Now: The Paterson Administration

by Courtney Gross and Gail Robinson
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Gotham Gazette image by Ya-Hsuan Huang

Call the community board in the Harlem district David Paterson used to represent, mention his name and on the other line comes a chuckle and the word "comedian." Ask a political observer what the new governor is like and they say "amiable," "charismatic" or "conciliatory." Wonder how the city could fare under a Paterson administration and some New York City officials say they have high hopes.

So who is this Albany veteran, besides being the state's first black and legally blind governor and a so-called ally to the State Legislature?

Paterson represented the 30th State Senate district , which comprises most of Harlem and parts of the Upper West Side, for more than two decades. Born in Brooklyn, he grew up on Long Island, graduated from Columbia in three years and then from Hofstra Law School in the 1970s. Following in the footsteps of his father -- longtime politician
Basil A. Paterson
-- Paterson ran for the State Senate in 1985 and eventually became the body's minority leader.

He held onto the seat until joining Spitzer's ticket as a candidate for the mostly ceremonial post of lieutenant governor in 2006, shocking some Albany observers since he was in line to become the Senate's majority leader should Democrats take back the body.

Aside from citing his congenial, amiable outlook, some say the new governor -- who is scheduled to be sworn in at 1 p.m. today -- is more progressive than Spitzer and more likely to get things accomplished given his good relationship with the legislature's leaders.

"You'll see a savvy guy that gets along with the legislature and will be able to put through more of an agenda than Spitzer, because he has a better relationship (with the legislature)," said

George Arzt, president of George Arzt Communication, a political consulting firm.

So far many of Paterson's priorities remain a mystery. Faced with a budget deadline two weeks away, Paterson said he would first concentrate on getting Albany back to business, which includes compromising on a budget with the State Senate and Assembly by April 1.

Scandal in the State

Eliot Spitzer's downfall was not the only New York political scandal last week. A Queens councilman appeared ready to resign as part of a plea deal on rape charges and a member of the state assembly from Brooklyn went on trial for bribery.

Only in New York, right? Wrong.

Political observers say the Empire State and the Big Apple just resemble any other area in the country. People make mistakes here just like anywhere else -- whether it's for money, sex or for boosting their nearly indestructible egos.

And though former Gov. Eliot Spitzer decided to step down in the face of an indictment, some officials cling to the country's mantra (innocent until proven guilty) and stay put.

We have seen some doozies recently, and here are a few of them.

Adam Clayton Powell *: Harlem assemblyman arrested earlier this month in the wee hours of the morning after he was seen swerving on the Henry Hudson Parkway. He was charged with drunk driving. Powell has had two other brushes with the law, but neither led to actual criminal charges.

Dennis Gallagher *: Queens councilmember reportedly plea bargaining a rape charge from last year down to a misdemeanor. He could step down any day now as part of the deal. That means another special election.

Efrain Gonzalez Jr. *: State senator from the Bronx indicted on corruption-related charges for allegedly using state funds to pay for personal expenses, including rental homes.

Diane Gordon *: Member of the State Assembly from East Brooklyn is on trial for bribery, because she allegedly demanded a house from a local builder in exchange for helping him get rights to develop on publicly owned land.

Alan Hevesi: Former state comptroller resigned last year in the face of a scandal over his personal use of public employees to care for his ailing wife.

Brian McLaughlin: Former Queens assemblyman pled guilty this month to racketeering and perjury. His crimes included siphoning funds from a Little League team.

Note: Asterisk means they are still serving in public office.

A New or Old Agenda?

An advocate for the disabled and minorities, Paterson was a member of the State Senate's minority for his entire tenure, which met legislation he proposed had little chance of passing.

Paterson's "speeches, which rely on facts and humor rather than decibels to score points, and his appreciation for the Senate's courtesies have won him wide respect," wrote Newsday's James Madore in 2002. But, the article continued, "For all Paterson's personal clout he still has few concrete results to show."

Despite that, his stands and actions pleased many progressive groups. The Working Families Party backed his successful bid to become minority leader earlier in the decade. In general, Paterson favors liberal positions on a range of issues, from opposing the death penalty to supporting gay marriage.

Whatever his ideology, some expect that under the circumstances Paterson will tread cautiously for a while. "He is not going to come in after a period of such damage and brooding and run down the gantlet," said David Birdsell , the dean of the School of Public Affairs at Baruch College. "It may look like a less ambitious agenda, but he may come in with a more realistic agenda."

Meeting the Budget Deadline

Barring any major unforeseen events, the budget will be the first item on Paterson's agenda. The governor and the legislature have until April 1 to hammer out a balanced budget for the 2009 fiscal year. Although the state has missed that deadline in the past, Paterson made it clear he intended to try to meet it this year. "We have a budget that's due and a deadline to meet," he said.

The process is already well under way. Assemblyman Herman Farrell Jr., chairman of the Assembly Budget Committee, told the Times that the Senate and the Assembly have passed their modifications to the governor's budget plan and will now meet to reconcile their differences.

Paterson, though, may have to play a bit of catch up. "I'm coming into a budget process where I have not been innately involved," he said on a radio program Thursday. "So I kind of feel like the student getting ready for the final exam, but they haven't attended any classes."

Even without the abrupt change in governors, the government faces a daunting task. "Since the state fiscal year ends March 31, it was going to take tremendous focus and determination to resolve a $4 billion budget gap under the best of circumstances," said James Parrott, deputy director and chief economist for the Fiscal Policy Institute .

"It's particularly important," Parrott said, "to try to balance the budget in a way that doesn't cause further harm to the economy," such as by instituting steep budget cuts or increasing "regressive fees and taxes."

One issue that might be back on the table is an increase in the state income tax on the wealthiest New Yorkers. The Assembly has