

Our Opinion: Cullerton brings hope of better times to come



IT'S ALL BUT IMPOSSIBLE to look past the strange circumstances of Wednesday's Senate swearing-in ceremony at the Statehouse, but we're going to try.

Because in addition to the fascinating spectacle of a governor seating the very body that may well remove him from office in a matter of weeks, something very profound in Illinois politics happened on Wednesday.

When Sen. John Cullerton succeeded Emil Jones Jr. as president of the state Senate, Illinois effectively witnessed the return of a bicameral legislature to state government. By providing political cover for Gov. Rod Blagojevich, Jones gave Blagojevich the power to put the state into the bind it now finds itself. Especially in the last two years, Jones' complicity with Blagojevich fomented a paralysis in state government as Blagojevich and the Senate locked horns with the Illinois House and both sides refused to budge.

WHILE WE BELIEVE the Senate must remove Blagojevich from office for Illinois government to start its healing process, we also lament that Jones' refusal to act as a check on Blagojevich's power helped bring about the current situation.

It was genuinely reassuring to hear Cullerton directly address this crisis after assuming the Senate presidency. As the governor hotfooted it away from the Senate chamber after handing the gavel to Cullerton, the new president did not soft-pedal the work ahead.

"The demand for change is a mandate that we must address," Cullerton told his colleagues.

Perhaps Cullerton did not intend that statement to refer to Blagojevich — there certainly is no denying that we need change in many other areas — but good luck interpreting it any other way.

Cullerton tacitly acknowledged that, for now at least, Blagojevich remains governor, and that Cullerton's election as Senate president was not a declaration of war on the governor.

“We will work with and not fight with this state's executive branch,” Cullerton said. He noted that the struggling national economy has put a significant strain on Illinois and flatly acknowledged the state's horrid record for paying its bills in a timely manner.

We've watched Cullerton skillfully shepherd some of the most difficult legislation — the state's seat belt law and the year-old indoor smoking ban are perhaps the two most famous examples — into law over his long career. His words Wednesday carried a blend of strength and reassurance that we hope indicate things are about to get a whole lot better in the functioning of state government.

Good show, guv

IN THE SPIRIT of giving credit where it is due, we have to hand it to Gov. Rod Blagojevich for his performance Wednesday. If his first appearance in Springfield since his arrest was awkward for the governor, he sure didn't show it. In fact, he masterfully kept up the “business as usual” façade he has worked so hard to perfect since Dec. 9.

As he waited for the newly sworn-in Cullerton to take the podium and address the Senate, Blagojevich showed that his current state of affairs has not dimmed his love of impromptu campaigning.

“I hope you can find some inspiration in Abraham Lincoln's words, ‘with malice toward none and charity for all’ let us come together and get the business of the people done,” said Blagojevich, constructing a strange amalgam of Lincoln's words and his own favorite slogan.

Rest easy, governor. Cullerton and the Senate got right down to the business of the people shortly after you vacated the chamber and headed back to Chicago. The rules they approved Wednesday afternoon should ensure you get a fair hearing before what we hope is the end of your political career.