

ANALYSIS: Albany implodes at worst time

Colin Read: Everybody's Business

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— The legislators in Albany almost take the fun out of dysfunction. And they've been working hard to do it, too. Meanwhile, our best chance for economic revival is squandered. It is as if we never fail to miss an opportunity.

I could not imagine a more inopportune time in our economic history to degenerate to the folly we have in Albany. This country and our counties are suffering from the worst economic plight since the Great Depression. Politicians are screaming at each other and we are missing the economic recovery boat. Rather than using the economic crisis to bring us all together in a Churchillian moment, we witness childish games and wrestling over the keys to the Senate.

It is hard to imagine how we may begin to dismantle the dysfunction. Obviously, such high drama is committed for at two reasons. One is a genuine love for drama and tactics in ways that would make Machiavelli blush. The other is a view of politics that fundamentally differs from the way economists view the world.

While economists strive for synergies in the belief the world is a positive sum game, politicians act as if the world is constant sum. They seem to believe one can gain only if another loses. Politics degenerates to winning and losing, rather than leading. And so politicians, in Albany and in Washington, seem to spend more time criticizing each other than they do rebuilding our flagging economy.

I have chosen to avoid the day-to-day dramas in Albany. After all, I think I would find their blood sport depressing, as if the growing ranks of the unemployed is not depressing enough.

What troubles me most, though, is our failure to vie for our share of the economic stimuli emanating from Washington. Congress placed a premium on shovel-ready projects that would get us back to work. The legislation was crafted to ensure it augmented what states were doing. They did so to ensure state governments would not threaten to make cutbacks to play a game of chicken with a federal government it hoped would sweep in like a white knight at the eleventh hour.

So, it is incumbent on states to have a plan. And this planning must be a bipartisan effort to preserve competitiveness and build infrastructure toward some vision of the future.

I am not sure what vision is coming from Albany these days. I see only visions of grandeur and control, not empowerment and community rebuilding.

I am certain that each party has its pet projects that it hopes it can accomplish if it is on the right side of a winner-take-all battle of titans. Can we put those pet projects aside for a year or two? Instead, we must focus on a few issues that have the best chance to rebuild our economy and create the infrastructure we need to be globally competitive. If we can do that now, we will all be in a better position to succeed once this economic

crisis is over, and bare-knuckle politics resumes.

Such a suspension of politics as usual would require a few ground rules.

First, we must abandon the metaphor of winning and losing. This is no game, and we are all on the same team.

Second, everybody with something to offer the entire team should be on the field, somehow. There are a lot of amazing ideas out there, and it would be sheer folly to imagine only a select few holed up in Albany have all the solutions.

Third, we must all agree on the paramount goal of creating and enhancing global competitiveness. There will be plenty of time to advance our special interests once we can ensure we have an economic future. There will also be plenty of time to lament our failures if our lack of cooperation causes the global economy to leave us behind.

Fourth, we must be willing to change. We cannot ask others to change if we are not willing to change ourselves. Something has to give if we want to move our state from a position that is consistently ranked near the bottom of competitiveness and good government. It only makes sense for each one of us to make accommodations now.

Fifth, we actually need to learn to talk to each other, not through each other. Too often I see political ads or hear speeches that are preaching to the converted rather than enticing us all to join a big tent. We need to repeal the politics of fear and spin, and instead move to the economics of synergy and inclusion.

Sixth, there can be no sacred cows, no third rails. Every idea that can enhance our mutual welfare must be explored, with no one holding a veto.

Seventh, we must expect more of each other and a lot of our leaders. Maintenance of the status quo is unconscionable at a time when the status quo has failed us. Those that want to lead because they prize the perks of office should step aside so that those who are called to lead can contribute to society.

Eighth, we must expect results and demand accountability. For too long we see rolled out the same old ideas, or worse, nothing at all. Our leaders must be measured on their success in making positive and discrete changes to our economic lives.

Ninth, we must remind our politicians of an important lesson we learned in kindergarten. If they have nothing good to say about another, perhaps they should say nothing at all.

And finally, if this fresh new approach to non partisanship cooperation works, perhaps we can agree to maintain it even after our economy recovers.

I realize that such an approach would remove political dysfunction from our list of spectator sports. With a hundred channels on cable television, I am sure we can find a worthy substitute. In the meantime, the synergies we can create with just a bit of cooperation and political maturity will give our children the leg up to help them pay for the debt we have left for them. To do anything less would be economically irresponsible.

Colin Read runs Economic Insights, a local economics consulting firm, and teaches economics and finance at SUNY Plattsburgh. His fourth book, "The Fear Factor," will be published in the U.S. this October. He can be reached at economicinsights@gmail.com.

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