

Illinois Rep. Jim Durkin

Veteran lawmaker has taken on key leadership role during turbulent, and crucial, time for government in his home state

by Katelyn Tye (ktye@csg.org)

Jim Durkin grew up in a self-described blue-collar, Democratic family in the suburbs of Chicago and first got introduced to politics in the 1970s by his older brother.

But it wasn't until the 1980s that Durkin found his own interests in public service and government — and also his political home.

"The enthusiasm about Ronald Reagan and patriotism made me feel really good about the country," Durkin recalls, "and I was able to identify with a lot of his policies."

That led him first to become active in local Republican politics and, eventually, to the Illinois statehouse.

"I decided I didn't want to be a guy sitting on the sidelines," Durkin says of his decision in 1994 to run for a House seat after previously serving as a local prosecutor and as an assistant state attorney general.

Two decades later, he is now leading Illinois House Republicans through a turbulent time in the state's political history. Illinois has been operating without a budget this fiscal year due to an ongoing impasse between Republican Gov. Bruce Rauner and the Democrat-controlled General Assembly. Meanwhile, a reform of the state's ailing pension system remains an elusive, yet essential, legislative priority.

"The environment we exist in right now has become very, very challenging," Durkin says.

But since the beginning of his tenure in the Illinois legislature, the work has been interesting — from being involved in the impeachment of a governor, to working with a future U.S. president, to contributing to history-making changes in criminal justice policy.

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Durkin reflected on his career in Illinois politics and discussed the policy challenges that he and fellow legislators must now confront. Here are excerpts.

Q: How has the politics in Illinois changed from when you were first elected to the House?

A: There was a time back in the 1990s, and maybe even the early 2000s, when there was much more collegiality on both sides of the aisle. We would do our work, but we would go out and have dinner together. We don't have that anymore. Now, our side feels the Democrats aren't doing enough to bring the budget impasse to a resolution, and Democrats feel the same way about us. This frustration boils over on the [House] floor, which you can tell by the tenor of the debate.

Q: In addition to trying to resolve the state's current budget impasse, what are your top policy priorities for this legislative session?

A: It's extremely important that we revisit pension reform. It's been almost nine months since the state Supreme Court stated that our [reform] bill from a few years ago was unconstitutional. There seems to be more of a willingness to revisit that issue, and to me, that's a priority for this year. We can't give up.

Bio-sketch of Rep. Jim Durkin

✓ House Republican leader since 2013; served in Illinois House from 1995 to 2002, then returned in 2006

✓ former assistant Illinois attorney general and assistant Cook County state's attorney

✓ lives in Chicago suburb of Western Springs with his family



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Q: What are some of your most memorable moments in Illinois politics and the legislature?

A: One of the most memorable moments happened after I lost my race for the U.S. Senate in 2002. Even though I was beaten pretty handily in the general election, I was able to get a lot done without any money in a primary race against two millionaires.

About a year and a half later, then-state Senator Barack Obama came up to me and said, "Jim, I'm thinking of running for the U.S. Senate. There's a bunch of rich guys in the race, just like you had, and I'm going to do what you did back in 2002. I'm going to outwork them, I'm going to get every newspaper endorsement, and I'm going to have a great grassroots organization." Then poof — he wins the primary and eventually becomes president of the United States.

I'm not saying I gave him the inspiration to run for the U.S. Senate, but I distinctly remember that moment when he said he wanted to capture what I had done in my primary campaign.

Q: You also served as ranking member of the House committee that oversaw the historic impeachment proceedings of Gov. Rod Blagojevich, who ultimately was removed from office by the legislature. What do you recall from that experience?

A: That was not an easy thing to do, and I took a very balanced and measured approach toward it. We had an awesome responsibility, and we had to understand our role, not only as the impeachment committee, but also the full House of Representatives, which basically served as the grand jury. I had spent a lot of time as a prosecutor in the grand jury [process], so I was able to look at it from that perspective, and was able to educate the Republican caucus about what exactly our responsibility was. Ultimately, we did the right thing, made the right decision, and the state's better off for what we did.

Q: Earlier on in your career, you had a role in some of the big reforms of Illinois' criminal justice

system, particularly on issues related to wrongful convictions in capital punishment cases— for example, concerns about the reliability of eyewitness testimony and the testimony of jailhouse informants. How and why did you get involved in that policy issue?

A: I was a former prosecutor and knew how the [criminal justice] system works. I passed some pretty hard-hitting bills out of the Illinois House [in 2002], but they were never called for a vote in the Republican-controlled state Senate. But after the bills were passed out of the House, the Illinois Supreme Court, by rule, gave criminal defendants the right to have depositions made of the witnesses on capital punishment cases.

Two years later, state Senator Obama incorporated my legislation into a larger bill to force the use of a pretrial reliability hearing on testimony of a jailhouse informant. I believe it made the system — which is never perfect — better. It's not about getting a conviction or a not-guilty verdict, it's about finding the truth.

Q: What advice do you have for newly elected legislators?

A: The easiest way to get up to speed on an issue is to talk to a colleague with that background. It's also important to talk to the people who will be impacted by policy changes. At the end of the day, someone's going to be affected, and we have to make sure there are no unintended consequences.

Joining the legislature is like drinking out of a firehose. It's important to observe and not try to do too much at once. Work on building alliances — not only among your own members, but among the other party, because you'll need their support as well.

New legislators also need to realize they're not going to get everything you want, so if you can get 75 percent of what you originally intended to do, you do it and you embrace it. If you're successful and get that much signed into law by the governor, then you figure out how you can get that 25 percent as part of a future legislative initiative. Rome wasn't built in a day. ★