



March 8, 2016

Governor Cuomo
Executive Chamber
Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Senator Flanagan
Majority Leader
Legislative Office Building
Albany, NY 12247

Senator Klein
Senate Co-Leader
Legislative Office Building
Albany, NY 12247

Senator Stewart-Cousins
Minority Leader
Legislative Office Building
Albany, NY 12247

Assemblymember Heastie
Speaker
Legislative Office Building
Albany, NY 12248

Assemblymember Kolb
Minority Leader
Legislative Office Building
Albany, NY 12248

Re: Request you convene an open leaders’ meeting to discuss ethics reforms

Dear Messrs. Cuomo, Flanagan, Klein, Heastie, Kolb and Ms. Stewart-Cousins:

We write to urge that you hold an open public leaders meeting to discuss and negotiate - in public - ethics reforms necessary to restore New Yorkers’ battered confidence in Albany.

A recent poll shows that 90 percent of New Yorkers believe that unethical behavior is a serious problem in state government. The recent convictions of two of Albany’s long-time legislative leaders have shocked even the most cynical observers.

If history is any guide, the typical Albany pattern will be to discuss ideas over the next few weeks during private negotiations and then secretly hammer out an ethics deal. That secret deal will then be heralded as “historic” with “unprecedented new reforms” that will be a silver bullet to resolve the state’s ethics shortcomings. The deal will be folded into the budget or end-of-session crush and the details and practical effects of the new “reforms” will not come to light until they are in operation.

Over time, it will then become clear that loopholes in those “reforms” will undermine many of their asserted benefits. Thus, what was heralded as “historic reforms” will have little positive impact and Albany will return to its status quo – until the next scandal. As a result, New Yorkers’ confidence in the integrity of state government will further erode.

New Yorkers deserve better. It’s time for meaningful actions, changes that are hammered out in public, not behind closed doors.

Our organizations have recommended clear, practical reforms that directly address New York’s ethics crisis. Various proposals have emerged from the Governor and some of the legislative conferences. But there has been little public dialogue about agreements to respond to what some describe as a political crime wave.

Instead of closed-door negotiations accompanied by separate public pronouncements and finger pointing, we recommend something different: a public discussion and negotiation to solve the ethics problems plaguing state government.

We call on you to hold an open leaders meeting, with one topic – ethics.

We ask that you take up some of the proposals that have been introduced, either as program bills or by individual legislators, and discuss *and negotiate* their provisions in the open.

It is, after all, the people's government. And it is clear that the public is sick of what they have seen. As the people's representatives, we urge you to open up the Capitol's windows and let the sun shine in – let the people see and hear the plans you collectively have to respond to Albany's ethics crisis.

And then, show New Yorkers – the people who voted for you, whose tax dollars pay for government – that you can collectively solve this shocking problem.

Our organizations promise to do what we can to discuss ideas and proposals to respond to this crisis, but ultimately it is up to you to respond.

Sincerely,

Lawrence Norden, Deputy Director
Brennan Center for Justice at NYU Law School

Dick Dadey, Executive Director
Citizens Union

Susan Lerner, Executive Director
Common Cause/NY

Dare Thompson, President
League of Women Voters, New York State

Blair Horner, Executive Director
New York Public Interest Research Group

John Kaehny, Executive Director
Reinvent Albany