

# Sun Journal

## Swearing in ceremony, history make an impression

By J Dwight , Populist Economics

Published: Dec 12, 2010 12:00 am

I had to smile at the plight of the powerful lobbyist who was dismayed that he didn't know "half of the people in that room."

"Too bad," I thought. "The little guy really did win."

There are many things of interest in the State House, but the one that moves me are the flags in the central hall. Flags steeped in the history of Maine.

December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010 was one of those historic days.

Between seeing the governor elect in the morning and the soon-to-be-former governor in the afternoon, watching the swearing in ceremonies and "stoking the fires" tradition accorded to the Franklin County Senator, here are a few of my "Mr. Smith Goes to Augusta" observations.

The morning started with Governor-elect Paul Lepage. He got out of the same car he had been to countless rallies, meetings, and fund-raisers during the campaign, then helped get breakfast pastries out of the trunk of the meeting organizer.

Paul Lepage is the same guy he was before the election, but different. He takes his job and responsibilities seriously, but still enjoys quips and humorous jabs. He listens and takes notes. He speaks with a keen interest in the issues at hand: jobs, the budget, and the difficulties we face as a state.

He realizes that Maine simply cannot afford the level and amount of programs that have been placed on it by previous legislatures. Over promising and underfunding is the problem. There is just not enough income to pay for current spending levels.

Even if the unexplained projections of the Revenue Forecasting Committee come true, \$420 million will have to be cut from the General Fund budget, 15%, unless some redirection of revenues from other off general fund sources are considered, or the payments to the pension

fund can be rescheduled.

Here is a quick overview. The state spends about \$7 billion. It has state-based revenues that total of about \$4 billion, State employees allocate and spend another \$3 billion more of Federal Funds.

Only \$2.8 billion is available to the legislature for appropriation through the General Fund. Of the General Fund expenditures, approximately 80% goes to salaries, benefits and pension payments for employees at all levels of government. Most of the money appropriated to General Purpose Aid to Education, Revenue Sharing, the University System, etc., gets spent on salaries, pensions and benefits at the local level.

Constitutionally mandated payments to the State Pension system in 2010 are \$326 million, 11% of the General Fund expenses. They are scheduled to be \$600 million by 2014 and \$800 million by 2018, 19% and 24% of the expenses of the General Fund respectively. This means other areas will suffer to make these payments. State and local employees must reconsider the dire situation they are imposing.

Other issues loom, like the \$400 million owed to the hospitals for Medicaid (Mainecare) program: \$133 million is due from the state. Payment will 'trigger' the release of the \$267 million Federal Funds. In recent interview in *Maine Ahead*, Steven Michaud, President of the Maine Hospital Association said, Maine simply "cannot afford this program."

History was being made when I saw Governor Baldacci at the swearing in of Senator Thomas B. Saviello of Franklin County.

A bit of State House mythology: It is tradition that the Senator from Franklin County remains outside the Senate chamber, while the other 34 Senators take their oath of office in the chamber itself. In a bow to the days when the State House was actually heated by wood fires, the Franklin County Senator is accorded the duty of 'stoking the fires' and later the honor of being privately and personally sworn in by the Governor in the Governor's office.

Tom Saviello honored the living Senators from Franklin County Chandler Woodcock, John Benoit, Charles Webster, and Walter Gooley, and his friend Senator David Trahan by inviting them to be his 'escort' for the ceremony.

With family and friends escorting as well, and in keeping with his 'duty' and forestry profession, Senator Saviello carried a chunk of red maple, to the Governor's office. It was a historic moment: "I was mindful of the legacy given me and thoughtful of my responsibilities to my constituents," said Tom Saviello, echoing, I believe, the thoughts of his fellow representatives.

John Baldacci appeared tired, worn. Maybe he is just relieved. I hope to speak with him again

some day.

I must say, he was gracious, but then, he had to be. Governor Baldacci was outnumbered by the "Stoking the Fires Escort" of Republicans.

The one thing that marred the day, for me, was the lurking presence of the lobbyists. Over one hundred milled about in the corridors between the House and Senate Chambers.

Is it too much to ask lobbyists to set side their self-interest for one day to let the representatives celebrate with their friends and family?

Though the 'little guy' won, as the presence of the lobbyists show, the work has just begun.

And, as the flag of the 20<sup>th</sup> Maine reminds me, it is a short distance from Gettysburg to Appomattox, but it was a long hard fight.

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