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Op-Ed Contributor

You Had a Friend in Albany

By MITCHELL L. MOSS

LAST month, Joseph Bruno, the upstate Republican who was the New York State Senate majority leader for more than a decade, announced he was retiring amid speculation concerning a federal investigation of his outside business activities. Democrats in New York City were thrilled by the news — but they are about to find out that Mr. Bruno was their best friend in Albany, and life without him won't be easy.

While New York City is the economic and cultural center of the Empire State, upstate and suburban legislators wield enormous control over the city's ability to govern itself. That's the result of a State Constitution drafted more than 100 years ago, when upstate Yankees didn't trust the immigrants flowing into Manhattan and required the city's officials to seek approval from Albany for essential responsibilities of municipal government.

But Mr. Bruno, although he hails from a rural district that includes Rensselaer and most of Saratoga Counties, also realized that the state could not survive without a strong and safe New York City, which accounts for more than half of the state's personal income tax revenue despite being home to just 40 percent of the state's population. As a result, he played a critical role in mobilizing recalcitrant Republican colleagues, including former Gov. George Pataki, to help city leaders.

When Michael Bloomberg was first elected mayor in 2001, the city faced a serious fiscal crisis and a projected municipal deficit of \$6 billion. Raising taxes was initially impossible in the post-Sept. 11 environment, when there was considerable doubt about the economic survival of the city. In 2003, the mayor, with the support of City Council, raised property taxes and also sought approval from Albany for increased city income taxes and a state takeover of \$2.5 billion in long-term debt issued during the 1970s fiscal crisis. The takeover of the debt, which had been guaranteed by the city sales tax, freed up \$500 million a year for vital public services. Without Mr. Bruno, it's unlikely that Republican state senators would have agreed with the Democratic-controlled State Assembly to aid the city.

More recently, when the city sought to start a \$13 billion school construction program, Mr. Bruno convinced his fellow Republicans to have the state split the cost 50-50. As a result, the state is paying the debt service for \$6.5 billion earmarked for renovating and constructing schools.

Since 2001, the homicide rate in New York City has gone down by almost 18 percent and rapes by more than 25 percent. Under the Bloomberg administration, the New York Police Department has put a new emphasis on getting illegal handguns off the streets. But it was Mr. Bruno who led the effort to impose the toughest penalties in the nation for those who carry a loaded illegal handgun. And, working closely with Mr. Bruno, Mayor Bloomberg overcame the Democratic Assembly's traditional resistance to expanding the use of the state DNA databank, so that it now covers all felonies and many misdemeanors.

Senator Bruno understood how to balance the values of upstate communities with the forces of growth that are shaping New York City and its suburbs. He recognized the need for compromise, for making deals and for striking bargains between opposing interests. And while he always took care of his local constituents, he knew enough to take care of New York City as well.

His departure from Albany is being treated as the end of an era, leading perhaps to the end of more than 40 years of Republican control of the State Senate. City Democrats may think that's great news, but they should be wary of the future.

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