

Matt Ryan: Coming up on New York Now, a conversation with Alessandra Biaggi, the senator-elect who toppled former IDC leader, Jeff Klein.

Alessandra Biag: The fact that we had eight state senators in New York state, which is ... Everybody looks to New York to be a progressive leader in this country, who were siding with the Republicans, especially after Donald Trump was elected, to me that was one of the biggest problems of our entire country.

Matt Ryan: And Jimmy Vielkind of the Wall Street Journal joins at the Reporters Roundtable.

Jimmy Vielkind: Will we see the Governor play one house against the other? Which house will be more progressive or more liberal, the senate or the assembly?

Matt Ryan: It's next on New York Now, right here on PBS.

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Winner of a New York state Emmy for best political program, this is New York Now.

Matt Ryan: Hi everyone and welcome to New York. I'm Matt Ryan.

Casey Seiler: And I'm Casey Seiler from the Times Union. Donald Trump and Andrew Cuomo try to achieve tunnel vision.

Matt Ryan: Yes, headline starts with a conversation between two gentlemen from Queens. On Wednesday, Governor Andrew Cuomo had lunch at the White House with fellow New Yorker Donald Trump. The main topic of conversation was funding for the Gateway Tunnel projects.

Andrew Cuomo: I'm a realist. There's politics in everything. Unfortunately, I think in many ways this situation is bigger than politics. I think it's in some ways dwarfs politics because you're talking about safety. You're talking about a vital need from a transportation point of view. You're talking about possible economic catastrophic circumstances if these tunnels fail. And I think that supersedes any parochial political interest, you know?

From my point of view, I'm a Democrat. I've been highly critical of the President on a number of levels. The President has been highly critical of me on a number of levels. But this is not about my politics. This is about I represent the people of the state of New York, period. And I will act in the best interest of the people of the state of New York, and that comes first.

Matt Ryan: We'll have more at the Reporters Roundtable. And finally, the Senate Democrats made it official on Monday. Yonkers Senator Andrea Stewart-Cousins

was elected Majority Leader by her Conference. And come January will become the first woman and first African American to lead the Chamber.

Andrea Stewart-: This is an incredibly proud moment for me. It is a moment that I don't believe, certainly when I came here, I would have ever dreamt of. But because of the incredible group of people that stand behind me and beside me, and frankly, with me, I have been unanimously elected the Majority leader.

We're excited because we know in January, people will get finally the government that they've been voting for, for so many years.

Casey Seiler: All right. And now we're joined to the Reporters Roundtable by my friend Jimmy Vielkind of The Wall Street Journal. So Jimmy, Andrea Stewart-Cousins elevated in January. She'll be coming back as the first female Majority leader of a Conference in the state legislature. It's been a long time coming for her. Very frustrating couple of years.

Jimmy Vielkind: Long time coming, and she has led the Democratic Conference since 2012. She took over from John Sampson, who later had some legal trouble. There was a spate, where the leaders of the Democratic Conference found themselves on the business end of some federal prosecutors. And Ms. Stewart-Cousins has a long career. She started off as an aid to the mayor of Yonkers in the early 1990s, as that city was grappling with desegregation plan for its public housing and for its schools. She was a member of the Westchester County legislature before she ran for State Senate in 2004. Lost by 18 votes. And then in 2006, dethroned Nick Spano, long time Republican, I believe the deputy leader of the Conference at that period.

But as you alluded to, perhaps more frustrating for Senator Stewart-Cousins was the fact that, at times over her tenure, Democrats had a numerical majority in the chamber. But as of course, I believe many of our viewers are aware we had the Independent Democratic Conference. It's acceded from its mainstream Democratic colleagues. And despite that numerical advantage, Ms. Stewart-Cousins was never able to take power.

Now without question, without any drama, she was unanimously anointed by her Democratic flock. She'll be formally installed as President of the State Senate in January. And it's going to lead to a very interesting dynamic next year, where we have three Democrats, again in control of the governing troika of state government, and where we have, for the first time in centuries in New York, a woman in the room. No more three men in room. Two men and a woman.

Casey Seiler: And also notably, both of the legislative leaders will be African American.

Jimmy Vielkind: That's right. That's right. And so, the dynamics of this are going to be interesting. Who will lead? Who will react? Who will we see Senator Stewart-

Cousins and Speaker Heastie work together to drive legislative priorities and sort of play two against one on the Governor? Will we see the Governor play one house against the other? Which house will be more progressive or more liberal, the Senate or the Assembly?

Now Senator Stewart-Cousins also has a challenge in that her core of her Conference comes from New York City and includes some very liberal members, whereas the gains that enabled the Conference to take the majority occurred in suburban areas, where they have more moderate representatives. It's going to be a test for her to find a way to balance those competing needs going forward.

Casey Seiler: You might sum that up as the subway versus the throughway. I moderated a discussion about the needs of the throughway. How do you pay attention to Upstate, where the throughway is based, while at the same time addressing the clear problems that bedevil the New York City subway system?

Matt Ryan: There's no question that's going to be a big topic that comes along. And Monday was really something to see. I mean, you have [inaudible 00:07:24] new senators. It's unheard of, and there's going to be a lot of us who are going to be learning faces and such. And we have no idea what kind of dynamic they're going to bring into it.

A lot of those folks got elected because they were the most progressive candidate. And so that's going to be probably a little bit more pressure on [inaudible 00:07:43] Stewart-Cousins. And for some of those more moderates, maybe a Tim Kennedy up in Buffalo, for example.

Casey Seiler: Speaking of people trying very hard to get along, we just, of course, coverage of Governor Cuomo's apparently very placid and productive, so it would seem, lunch meeting on Wednesday with President Donald J. Trump, who has been the butt, the target, of a lot of Cuomo's rhetoric on the stump leading up to election day.

Jimmy Vielkind: That was just business. It's okay.

Casey Seiler: It's politics. Now for the pros, right?

Jimmy Vielkind: That's right. Both men had nice-ish things to say about each other emerging from the meeting. There was not much news, though, on the stated topic of the meeting, which was the Gateway program, which for viewers who may not be familiar with the downstate transportation system, seeks to enhance the rail corridor between Newark and New York City. And really is focused on adding a third tube to the cross-Hudson tunnels, which were built by the Pennsylvania Railroad Company in 1910.

Matt Ryan: Yeah, crumbling as the Governor-

Jimmy Vielkind: Crumbling. They were filled with salt water by Hurricane Sandy. And in sort of an interesting Trump-whispering discovery, the Governor and other officials have been talking about this tunnel for years and it's sort of been stalled in the politics of Washington. President has been loathe to give funding to something that he knows is a big priority of Chuck Schumer, the Democratic Leader in the Senate. So funding for the Gateway program has been caught up in much larger political debates.

So Governor Cuomo cut a video of the inside of the tunnel, sent that to the President. And according to the Governor, the President then called him up. So word to the wise, if you want to get Donald Trump's attention on something, don't send a report. Don't write a card. Send a video, and you'll get lunch of shrimp, beef and some chocolate cake.

Casey Seiler: Schumer's people said after the meeting that they were under the impression that the President's interest in Gateway is directly tied to the President's desire to secure funding for the southern border wall as well. That this is being set up as a poker chip in that negotiation.

Jimmy Vielkind: Well, a delicious lunch, but no commitments on funding. No commitments on timetable. No commitments of anything. So the Governor said that he wants to see new bids generated for this tunnel. He said he wants to see Amtrak, which owns the rail corridor and which has one of the three seats on this entity, the Gateway Development Corporation, that is tasked with developing this project. He said he wants to see Amtrak off of there. But again, no funding commitments, no time frame commitments.

Casey Seiler: So \$13 billion project, the Governor said-

Jimmy Vielkind: For just the tunnel. \$30 billion overall.

Casey Seiler: Right. And the Governor said for the tunnel project, the state can pony up about 3.25 billion, which the total cost just of the tunnel project is, you know, that's three times what the Tappan Zee bridge cost.

Jimmy Vielkind: That's right. And it's half, or maybe a little less than half. Actually, it's about a third of what the New York City subway is going to need over the next 20 years. So as the Governor said, a billion here, a billion there, pretty soon you're talking about real money.

Casey Seiler: And last but not least, we've got a couple of seconds left. But the Governor has reiterated that his 2020 plans do not include running for President, but he described the type of President that Democrats need and it sounds a whole lot like ...

Jimmy Vielkind: Andrew Cuomo.

- Casey Seiler: Yes.
- Jimmy Vielkind: Yeah. It doesn't seem that he's running for President. He seems to be good at governing. He enjoys governing. He's not out in the early primary states. I don't think he's running.
- Casey Seiler: All right. That's where we're gonna have to leave it. Thanks very much to Jimmy Vielkind of The Wall Street Journal.
- Andrew Cuomo: All right, thanks Jimmy. After Monday's joyous meeting among the 40 Democrats in the State Senate, our Karen DeWitt sat down with probably the most well known of the freshmen, Alessandra Biaggi, who upset long time lawmaker and the former head of the independent Democrats. Jeff Klein.
- Karen DeWitt: Alessandra Biaggi, thanks for joining us. We're really glad to have you on your first day in Albany. Not in the Senate majority yet, but soon to be. This was your first meeting.
- Alessandra Biag: Thank you for having me. Yesterday was Orientation Day and it was very exciting to be here, especially in the morning with most of the new members who were there. And it was a very positive experience so far.
- Karen DeWitt: So we're in this big historic capital. What strikes you the most about the capital?
- Alessandra Biag: I mean, just walking around and feeling the magnitude of what has been accomplished here. Just walking through the halls, especially right now when the legislature is not in session. So it's very quiet. So it gives you a moment to pause, which I'm a big fan of. Taking that moment to just think what has been accomplished here and what we can accomplish, the possibility, I think that that is inspiring.
- And also all of those who've come before, who walked through these halls. I don't think it's really hit me yet. I think the moment it really will is when I sit in that seat in January.
- Karen DeWitt: Which comes in January. So for those who don't know, you defeated the former leader of a Senate Conference, former Independent Democratic Conference leader, Jeff Klein, despite the fact that he spent \$3 million on the race. What made you decide to take him on?
- Alessandra Biag: Well, there are many reasons, but I think the most important one was it directly impacted me because I was working on legislation after the 2016 election. I'm an attorney working on legislation for Governor Cuomo. And almost every bill I was working on was not passing. I mean, it was all types of different things, the Reproductive Health Act for Women, it was immigrant issues, it was school issues. I mean, nothing was going through.

And so, I paused and I thought to myself what's going on here? Now I knew about the IDC. Of course, I knew about Jeff Klein. Jeff Klein had been my State Senator since the time I can remember having a State Senator, so that's shows you how long he's been representing me-

Karen DeWitt: And IDC's often sided with the Republicans and helped keep them in power for those that don't know that.

Alessandra Biag: Exactly, the Independent Democratic Conference. So all of these roads of blocking legislation lead back to the IDC. And so, when I finally pushed on it a little bit and started to say "Hey, what's going on here?" The majority of people around me started to say "Oh, honey, that's Albany. Like it's never going to change." And I came home from work one day. I received a mailer. And on that mailer, it was my opponent. It was him claiming that he was a champion for women's health, and that was the breaking point for me. I said "Absolutely not will I allow this to be going on in this way."

So I left my job there and I just decided to run. Now, did I know what was ahead of me in the road? How hard it would be? No. I did know. It would be a very big challenge. I mean, he had a war chest, as you mentioned. We were outspent 11 to one. That was incredible.

But I think that the fact that we had eight State Senators in New York State, which is everybody looks to New York to be a progressive leader in this country, who were siding with the Republicans, especially after Donald Trump was elected, to me, that was one of the biggest problems of our entire country, right here in New York State. And it had to stop because the legislation that I just mentioned, only some of them ... I mean, there were at least 25 pieces of legislation blocked. We can't afford that in New York State, especially at this time.

Karen DeWitt: Now six of the eight former IDC members were defeated in the primary. Do you think if Trump hadn't won in 2016 that wouldn't have happened?

Alessandra Biag: You know, it's hard to say. And it's hard to say because I think that one of the benefits of a Trump presidency are more people being awake. So the benefit that we received on my campaign was that more people had been involved than ever before, right? We had 500 volunteers in the streets, knocking doors, making calls, writing postcards, and that definitely came from Trump being the President.

But the majority of people in the district were motivated by grassroots organizations like anti-IDC, like Indivisible, like No IDC NY, who had really been laying this groundwork 18 months previous to even when I had gotten into the race to really inform voters to say "Hey, did you know that for eight years, you've had a State Senator who you think is a Democrat, but really isn't?" And I think that it resonated because of Trump, but I don't think that it necessarily

was taken over the finish line because of Trump. But we certainly were successful, which is I think, a result of just more people being involved.

Karen DeWitt: So you mentioned some of your priorities, the Reproductive Health Act, which would codify the abortion rights in Roe v. Wade into New York State law. We talked to your Senate leader, soon to be Majority leader, Andrea Stewart-Cousins on this program a couple of weeks ago about that pretty extensively. But you are also interested in some other women's issues. Are there other things that you think need to be done that have been, in your view, neglected over the years?

Alessandra Biag: So the Comprehensive Contraceptive Coverage Act, which would [crosstalk 00:16:24] simply expand access to different types of contraception that insurance companies don't currently cover. Also affordable childcare, only 20% of childcare needs are met in the state of New York. Now, I say this under the umbrella of women's issues, although we know that it's not just a women's issue. It's also a man's issue.

But we do need to meet affordable childcare needs because when it comes to childcare, the burden falls on the woman in the relationship, if it's a heterosexual relationship. And the woman will generally leave the workplace, and we do not want women having to leave work because of a shortage of affordable childcare. That's another priority of mine.

Also, when it comes to immigrant rights, I mean passing the Liberty Act and the Dream Act are two really important things. The Dream Act would allow for undocumented children to pursue higher education, which is something that we can do in the state of New York.

Karen DeWitt: And has been languishing for a while-

Alessandra Biag: That's right. Very long time.

Karen DeWitt: Now what about campaign finance reform? That's been talked about for as long as I've been here, which is a lot longer than you've been here.

Alessandra Biag: My goodness, yes.

Karen DeWitt: Where do you stand on that?

Alessandra Biag: So under the entire umbrella of reform, campaign finance reform and election reform are two of the largest priorities I think that I have individually. And I won't speak for anybody else, of course, but campaign finance reform, removing money out of politics is one of the ways that we stop corruption from happening. It is very clear that money has had a corrupting force over the entire legislature up and down this entire state.

And so, it's not a small thing. I think we have the most legislators that have gone to prison in this state. It's embarrassing-

Karen DeWitt: There's been quite a string of them [crosstalk 00:17:59]-

Alessandra Biag: And I think that one of the ways that we can prevent that is by taking money out of politics, having campaign finance reform. You know, supporting the Fair Elections Act, which basically would create similar to what the New York City Council does, which is a matching contribution system.

Also, election reform, making sure that we have early voting in New York, one of the last states that has voting, I mean, early voting. And so, there are ways that we can actually allow for the people to take back their democracy.

Karen DeWitt: It's going to be hard, though, for some of the people in power here to give up a system that they've succeeded from.

Alessandra Biag: It is.

Karen DeWitt: So how do you convince them to take a risk?

Alessandra Biag: I think, and it's interesting that you say it's ... I don't see it as a risk. I see it as a risk not to take it. I think it's very risky to continue to have these large sums of money be able to be funneled into our campaign. So I'll give you an example. The LLC loophole, right? If you are an individual, you can create as many LLCs as you choose to create-

Karen DeWitt: The Limited Liability Company. Sure.

Alessandra Biag: Exactly. And then, you can just put the maximum contribution into that specific LLC and give that contribution to whichever legislature you choose. LLCs are treated as individuals, that's also a problem in the state of New York, and millions and millions of dollars have flowed through this mechanism, this loophole. So we've gotta close that loophole.

Karen DeWitt: And politicians like Governor Cuomo, who just won his third term has benefited from that.

Alessandra Biag: Governor Cuomo, a lot of Democrats, a lot of Republicans, And here's what I say to this. I think that when you're campaigning, you campaign under the laws that exist. That makes a lot of sense, but it doesn't mean that we shouldn't change it. Right? To make the system more fair, to have a more diverse body, to have more diverse contributors, this is one of the ways that we can allow for that to happen moving forward.

Karen DeWitt: Now a couple things that you are for that might end up costing some money is a single payer healthcare system for New York. And also, more funding for public

schools to finally fulfill the over a decade old court order that New York spend more on schools. Do you think that those things are possible even in the Senate Democratic Conference where you have new members from Long Island, where constituents are really worried about taxes, and they don't want their taxes to be raised.

Alessandra Biag: So I do. And I just want to start by saying that I think one of the most important things is to identify that the Conference needs to be a functioning Conference. That we need to govern as a collective whole. And I think that in and of itself is a transformation from what we've seen in the past 10 years. So I think that's step number one.

I think having these conversations with all of our Conference members who represent very diverse areas across the state is incredibly critical to making sure that these things pass, but I do think that they are possible. I think that making sure that we understand the fiscal impacts of the New York Health Act, which is single payer, and how much money is owed to our public schools from the state. And then thinking about okay, what are the responsible funding streams? Are there new funding streams? You know, how can we actually raise revenue in the state of New York to make sure that these things happen? We also have a failing MTA system and these are all competing interests.

I mean, I think that for the issues that have this fiscal impact, it's going to take a little bit longer. But I think we want it to take a little bit longer. We want to get this right. But for the public schools, which it's an urgent thing, I think we've got to be really serious about the priorities and the things that we talked about, and how we're making sure that these interests are being met. And I think that's going to be a larger discussion amongst the whole conference.

Karen DeWitt: Well, would you give up on some of these issues for the good of the conference, do you think? Or [crosstalk 00:21:26] at that point?

Alessandra Biag: I think it really depends. And I think that each issue ... And that's a very legal answer and I am a lawyer, so I know [crosstalk 00:21:33]. But it comes from an educated place because I've been in situations where it depends what's put in front of you, right? Is it MTA versus schools? I hope not. Right? Is it healthcare over schools? I sure hope not. I think that if we look at states like California and Colorado and Washington and Nevada, California specifically has a \$6.1 billion surplus in their budget.

We should be looking to these states to say what have you done that we have not yet done? What revenue streams have you been able to, you know? Or levers have you been able to pull that we can pull to make sure that in the state of New York, we can have the things that we need here.

Karen DeWitt: Well, are there any that you're thinking of that we haven't heard of yet? [crosstalk 00:22:15]-

- Alessandra Biag: Heard of yet probably, but I mean the legalization of marijuana is something I've been a proponent of from the beginning of my campaign. It's something that I think that we should do. And I think that anybody who's watching this and thinking to themselves well, that's a crazy idea, listen, so is alcohol. Alcohol is practically a poison that we all ingest legally, right? Marijuana is a plant. It is a dangerous substance and by legalizing it, we make something that is dangerous a little bit safer. And we can also raise revenue on that as well.
- Karen DeWitt: Yeah. What are the estimates of the revenue?
- Alessandra Biag: I actually don't know the full details and that's actually a question I asked someone on my staff to look into. But even if it was \$40 million, that's \$40 million more than what we already have in the state that we could put to something. And I know that the subways need billions of dollars. [inaudible 00:22:59] needs billions of dollars. Our public schools need billions of dollars. So we need additional ways. But if this is a lever that we can pull, we should pull it.
- Karen DeWitt: And finally, last question. I know you haven't even officially become a senator yet. But do you think a seat in Congress is in your future?
- Alessandra Biag: Oh, my goodness. It's funny to hear you say that because I'm thinking about how we're going to set up our district office and who are we going to hire for our staff? I mean, anything is possible, but it's certainly not something that I'm thinking about of top of mind right now. But I am very excited and very fortunate, and feel very blessed to be representing the people of District 34.
- And I'll just share this with you. The night before the Primary I went to bed, thinking to myself and saying out loud to my fiance "You know, I feel very responsible because we've now spent almost 11 months campaigning in this district, talking to voters." People who are strangers stopping and sharing their stories with us, asking us for help, asking us to please listen. Go to Albany and please fight for the things that they've been asking for and wanting. And the fact that we won, not only means that we have the opportunity to represent them. But it means that there's an opportunity to have partnership in the community, I think, in a way that we haven't seen before.
- And so, I am excited about that because that goes back to what we started with, which is that transformational way of doing politics, not that transactional politics that I think people are so used to. You know, if you do this for me, then maybe I'll help you over here. I'm not keeping a scorecard. I'm just excited to be able to put my boots on the ground, to fight really hard for the people of District 34, and to put bills into that coffer that are going to help and protect all of the people in the state of New York. That is a huge privilege that I feel just an immense sense of gratitude to be able to even have and do.
- Karen DeWitt: Well, it's gonna be fun watching it all unfold. Thanks for giving us some of your time on this busy day. Thank you for having me.

Casey Seiler: That leads us to this week's New York Now poll question. How do you feel about the fact that Democrats will control both legislative chambers in 2019? Let us know at nynow.org. Last time around, we asked if you were happy Amazon chose New York City as one of its headquarters and most said no. Reagan in New York City watching on WNET told us "New York doesn't need another tech giant increasing subway traffic and raising the cost of housing."

Genevieve in Nassau County watching on WLIW agreed calling it "Corporate welfare. Will make affordable housing more scarce and stress existing infrastructure." And finally Amy in upstate thought it was a good idea saying "There are so many lower income and educated people who need higher income jobs in this metropolitan area."

We appreciate everyone taking the time to vote. You can do so this week at nynow.org. It's where you'll find all of our past programs online and links to us on social media. Nynow.org also has a link to my papers, Outstanding Capital Confidential blog, also accessible at timesunion.com.

All right. Well, that's all the time we have for today. We send you off with video from the annual Canadian Pacific holiday train decked out in thousands of LED lights. CP Rail donated \$4,500 to local food pantries in the North Country that help feed some 8,000 families. I'm Casey Seiler from the Times Union.

Matt Ryan: Great holiday tradition in the North Country. I'm Matt Ryan. Thanks for watching. And we'll see you next time right here on your local PBS station.