

Ready for Reform: The progressives challenging State House leadership — an interview with Senator Sam Bell



Senator Sam Bell

“Rhode Islanders are now standing up, running for office and fighting for the values that we’ve always had.” This is what State Senator Sam Bell believes underlies the wave of progressive wins for General Assembly seats we saw this year in Rhode Island - a wave that has threatened the power of Senate Leadership, what Bell calls “the right-wing machine.”

Bell, who represents State Senate District 5 (a core district of Providence, made of neighborhoods west of downtown), stood strong in support of Senator Gayle Goldin’s challenge of Senate President Ruggiero, and Senator-elect Jeanine Calkin’s challenge of Senate Majority Leader McCaffrey. His reason was simple: “We are going to have to build a leadership in the State Senate that supports the core values of the Democratic Party. And most importantly, cares about the people of our state - which the current leadership does not.”

Alex Kithes (Motif): You first ran in 2018. What inspired you to run?

Sam Bell: I was angry with how poorly run our state was, and really frustrated with watching people suffering because of the policy decisions made at the State House - egregious, right-wing policy decisions that had huge impacts on the daily lives of the people of our state.

I ran on a message of fighting for people who are struggling, and being a real Democrat, and the people of my district were good enough to elect me. It's been an incredible honor to serve as their senator.

AK: Coming now to 2020, you had a pretty heated reelection race where you were being challenged by Councilwoman Jo-Ann Ryan, which you won by a pretty big margin. What was the margin? And tell me why you believe your constituents sent you back to the State House.

SB: I got 72.5% of the vote or so. The election was portrayed by a lot of people in the media as a serious race and a strong challenge, and they [Jo-Ann Ryan's campaign] certainly spent more money than I did and put a lot of energy into unseating me.

The message I heard over and over again was: The people don't want brutal budget cuts. The people want a state government that invests in helping the people of our state, that invests in helping people who are struggling because of illness, invests in healthcare, invests in housing, invests in social programs and poverty reduction, in jobs, and keeping our restaurants afloat. That's what people want their government to do, and they really reject the policies of slash and burn that we saw cause so much damage to our state when we cut everything in the last big crisis, the Great Recession, and Rhode Island spun into a massive economic crisis.

People remember that, and how painful it was, like when they laid off every single teacher in the City of Providence. I think a really huge turning point for a lot of people in my community was the round of consolidations in the Providence schools this year. It was the first big round of budget cuts that hurt the community. Mount Pleasant High was especially hard-hit, and it was really clear for my neighbors that they care a lot about having someone that would go up and fight against these policies.

AK: This year saw a lot of progressive General Assembly wins around the state. What factors do you think were responsible for that? Do you see it as a sign of a changing political climate in Rhode Island?

SB: Rhode Island is a blue state, but we've had people whose policies are basically the policies of the national Republican Party running as Democrats, and governing and winning because real Democrats don't actually challenge them or run against them. And when real Democrats run - and run strong campaigns - you typically find that Democrats want Democrats.

What happened in 2020 was that we saw a huge, very-well-organized effort to run really strong, inspiring candidates. The RI Political Co-op made an incredible difference in recruiting a really strong slate of inspiring candidates, and a lot of them won by massive margins. Groups like Sunrise, ReclaimRI, and [PVD] DSA really put in the work to make these wins happen.

AK: I want to focus for a second on the topic of healthcare and health insurance, which is on everyone's minds due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and you are a strong advocate for healthcare justice. Where do you see that the General Assembly has failed in their approach to healthcare legislation, both prior to and in light of COVID-19?

SB: We've had years of truly embarrassing failures when it comes to healthcare, which is perhaps the government's most sacred responsibility. We have slashed Medicaid year after year. This final budget, that came out just a few weeks ago - which came after a wave of progressive primary wins, a strong challenge to the leadership and an unprecedented activist movement standing up to fight for a just budget - was the first budget in years, certainly since Gina Raimondo was elected, that didn't cut Medicaid.

Our Medicaid system has been slashed year after year - especially in 2015 - and that's left us with a healthcare system that has been crippled. And it's not just Memorial Hospital and nursing homes shutting down around the state. It's that what's left of our healthcare system has often been bought out by for-profit, out-of-state corporations that don't care about quality of care, that prioritize their profits, that don't support their workers. Most of our nursing homes and several of our hospitals don't even have unions in place! And so we've created this system that isn't just underfunded, but where the management has a very corporate mentality and isn't focused on delivery of care. Of course they didn't stock extra PPE! Of course they weren't focused on the possibility of a pandemic!

And when this pandemic rolled through, the healthcare system - especially in the nursing homes, where the Medicaid cuts have been the harshest - it has been absolutely brutal.

And then, we get to the rest of our healthcare policies. It's not just that we cut Medicaid. But we messed with the payments model in a way that really penalized delivery of care, and we created a very strong incentive to not delay elective surgeries. Through messing around with payment models, we have put in place a real lack of strong insurance coverage protection.

In Massachusetts, there are much stronger protections to make sure that insurance companies actually have covered care, compared to Rhode Island. We've had a real lack of good enforcement to make sure that health insurers actually do the right thing and pay for healthcare. And on top of all of this, we slashed taxes for the insurance industry - and people forget that.

We're still living through the legacy of privatization of Medicaid. It really is a Republican policy that has been implemented in our state that has cost so much; and what it means is that, if you're on Medicaid in Rhode Island, you're not actually on Medicaid. You're on a private insurance company (usually Neighborhood or United).

All of these policies add up to a really cruel healthcare regime in our state; and when it came to the pandemic, many states invested in public health. At the very beginning of the crisis, California invested a billion dollars in public health. Rhode Island, early-on, had really good COVID-19 safety protections. But when it came to delivering the money, we failed. It was in nursing homes especially, but the hospitals also went through this crisis in financial distress.

AK: You've been an outspoken critic of State House Leadership, and were a leader in that fight in the Senate in 2018. And this year, you made the decision to vote for Senator Goldin for Senate President, and Senator Calkin for Senate Majority Leader. Where do you see existing leadership has failed, and where would Senators Goldin and Calkin - or more generally, progressive leadership - do better?

SB: It's a lot of things. It's a lot of the core social issues. Dominick Ruggerio isn't just endorsed by the NRA, he hasn't just taken thousands of dollars from the NRA; he's really done their bidding and advocated for an extreme, right-wing agenda on gun safety protections. He's pro-life, of course, and fought really hard to try to stop the Reproductive Health Care Act. He voted against marriage equality! Especially for people in the LGBTQ+ community, it's really tough to forgive that vote - and as far as I know, he's never apologized for it. In fact, the majority leader, his deputy, told me that he would never apologize for that vote.

But when it comes to the economic issues is when you see the real damage. Ruggerio and McCaffrey obviously both voted for the tax cuts for the rich. It's now 14 years later, and it's sometimes easy to

forget just how radical a thing this was. It's hard to find a red state that has cut taxes for the rich this much. North Dakota - when they had all that oil revenue come in - they eliminated their income tax so technically they lowered their top rate more than Rhode Island did. But it's extremely difficult to find an example, even in red states, of tax cuts for the rich that big - we cut the top rate by 3.91%!

And when we did that, we slashed everything to pay for it. This was implemented from 2006 to 2010, right in the peak of the economic crisis, and those cuts were devastating. In Providence, we saw our library system almost shut down, and wound up being half-privatized; they fired every teacher in the city, and they slashed so many crucial programs. And that devastation really flowed from those policies.

And the current leadership has now prioritized that same agenda.

When it came to the pandemic, I was truly shocked by the failure of leadership. I thought I'd be fighting them to make sure that they didn't only help businesses; but also help workers, people struggling with their rent, people in poverty, people with COVID, invest in health care. I didn't expect to have to fight to get them to even try and do anything - to appropriate any money to help. That wasn't the fight I expected to have, and it shocked me that we just packed up and went home, and did nothing as so much suffering rolled out across our state.

A huge number of the senators who voted for Ruggiero privately told me they were really upset by this, and it really bothered them. So I hope that we can move forward; and ultimately, we are going to have to build a leadership in the State Senate that supports the core values of the Democratic Party and, most importantly, cares about the people of our state - which the current leadership does not.