

New York to Appoint First Black Governor

Paterson will take reins after Spitzer scandal

by Aisha I. Jefferson

March 12, 2008 -- New York Lt. Gov. David A. Paterson will become the state's first African American governor on Monday following Gov. Eliot Spitzer's announced resignation today. This makes Paterson the third African American and the first legally blind person to govern a state in modern U.S. history.

Spitzer, a married father of three who built his career on being an ethical leader, was recently linked to a high-end prostitution ring and is under immense pressure to resign or face impeachment procedures. Media reports state that Spitzer and Paterson are in talks to transition their teams.

Paterson, 53, was elected lieutenant governor in November 2006 on a ticket headed by Spitzer, and will fulfill the remaining three years of the governor's term. Calling Paterson "a very experienced and respected political figure," Marty Linsky, a faculty member at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, says he "should be fine if he gets some things done and creates a less hostile atmosphere in Albany."

Although Spitzer's "Mr. Ethics" reputation was welcomed to help clean-up corruption and reform New York state government, his tough-guy tactics led to contention with many legislators and some say it has hindered his ability to make significant progress since entering office 14 months ago. Paterson's appointment could end much of that infighting. "Spitzer made a point of making an enemy of the legislation. Paterson is from that world. He'll understand it in a way Spitzer hasn't," Linsky says.

Fredrick C. Harris, professor of political science and director of the Center on African American Politics and Society at Columbia University, concurs. "I think he will be a very capable governor mostly because Eliot Spitzer has been feuding with the state legislature."

Paterson has a long association with public service. Born in Brooklyn, New York, Paterson is part of New York's African American political elite. His father, Basil, is a legendary politician who was the first African American secretary of state of New York and the first African American vice-chair of the national Democratic Party. The elder Paterson also ran for New York's lieutenant governor in the 1970s-albeit unsuccessfully.

Paterson earned his bachelor's degree in history from Columbia University in 1977 and five years later received a law degree from Hofstra Law School. He began representing Harlem in the New York State Senate in 1985, and in 2002, became its minority leader, the first African American legislative leader in the state's history, according to the Lt. Governor's Website. Paterson serves as an adjunct professor at Columbia's School for International and Public Affairs. A staunch supporter of Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton's presidential run, Paterson's name was mentioned to replace her if she won the presidency.

As lieutenant governor, the Harlem resident's attention centered on stem cell research, alternative energy, reducing domestic violence, and increasing the role minority- and women-owned businesses play in New York State, according to a biography of Paterson on New York State's Website. Paterson has promoted politics of inclusion for minorities and women for years as a state senator, Harris adds.

While Linsky says Paterson would experience a long honeymoon period as governor, which could help him make progressive changes, Harris warns that if Paterson wants to get elected next term, he "has to be reform-oriented because of New Yorkers' negative views of Albany."

With Paterson replacing Spitzer, Joseph L. Bruno, New York State Senate's majority leader, would become lieutenant governor. A governorship would place Paterson in the ranks of current Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick and the former governor of Virginia, Douglas Wilder, as the nation's only African American governors since Reconstruction.