## Four Leaders on Distractions, Downturns and



## **SENATOR TONYA SCHUITMAKER**

Michigan Senate President Pro Tem

**SL:** What's the greatest challenge you'll face in the 2012 session?

**Schuitmaker:** We need to continue working together to help this state move forward. The residents of Michigan are our first priority, and we need

to keep them in mind as we introduce legislation and move Michigan toward a prosperous future.

**SL:** Were you surprised by the challenges you faced in the 2011 session? **Schuitmaker:** I wasn't surprised. Michigan has lost more than 850,000 jobs in the past nine years, making it clear that something had to change. I firmly believe the best social program is employment. It was apparent that we needed to chase jobs, not revenues.

**SL:** In working on the budget, what was your top priority?

**Schuitmaker:** I knew we needed to make tough decisions and make serious reforms to how our government operates and the amount of money we spend. We are delivering substantial reforms to reduce unnecessary regulations and improve the economic climate to create jobs and improve the quality of life for Michigan families. In the first seven months of the

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session, we dramatically transformed the landscape of Michigan into a pro-jobs, pro-small business, pro-growth state.

**SL:** How do you work with the other party?

**Schuitmaker:** We keep communication open and professional. Yes, there can be big philosophical differences on what the priorities should be due to the economic situation, but that does not take away from the fact that there are a lot of wonderful, service-minded individuals working in the Legislature. The range of issues we work on is daunting. Since Jan. 1, the governor has signed 127 bills into law. Of those, 54.2 percent of the legislative votes were unanimous by both the Republicans and Democrats. Even though we have our differences, there is wholehearted agreement more than half the time.

**SL:** What advice would you give to the next leader?

**Schuitmaker:** Do your homework. Be active in your community and listen to your constituency. It's a lot of hard work, but it is so rewarding to be a part of the democratic process and to make a positive impact in Michigan.



SENATOR
DONALD E. WILLIAMS
Connecticut Senate
President

**SL:** Looking at the 2011 session, were you surprised by the challenges you faced?

**Williams:** The challenges were significant but expected. We knew we had a large projected deficit for the next biennium, and closing that gap was a top priority. At the same time, we focused on fighting for economic improvement and job creation in the face of a national and global recession. We had greater success this past session compared with the last two years, in part because of a productive working relationship with the newly elected Democratic governor, Dannel P. Malloy.

**SL:** In working on the budget, what was your top priority?

**Williams:** Finding the right balance of budget cuts and revenue increases to do the least amount of harm to Connecticut's economy. We made our tax code more progressive and

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approved deep spending cuts, but avoided slashing municipal aid, education funding and resources for economic development. The goal was to preserve the investments necessary for economic recovery.

**SL:** What are you doing to promote respect for and participation in representative democracy? **Williams:** Our country is under significant pressure today as it was during the Depression of the 1930s. At that time, the world was in upheaval, our economy was devastated, and families suffered. Some people questioned whether our system of government had the flexibility and strength necessary to survive. There are many similarities in today's problems. Our constituents want us to get things

done. The best message we can send is that it's possible to tackle the toughest problems in a way that underscores the thoughtfulness and fairness of our democracy.

**SL:** What do you do in your spare time?

**Williams:** Right now I'm reading about the abolitionist movement and the decades leading up to the Civil War. I miss Tony Hillerman—his mystery novels set in the Southwest are favorites. Music is an important stress-reliever, as is getting outdoors for hiking and exercise. Striving to maintain outside interests is important. It's not healthy to be all-consumed by politics.

**SL:** What do you wish you had known before you became a leader?

Williams: That we were about to go into the worst economic crash since the Great Depression. How we climb out of this downturn is the greatest challenge of our generation, and there is always more research you can do. I've worked with my colleagues to understand and communicate the changed economic circumstances for our state and country and to help create the pathways for retaining and creating jobs.

## **Tough Decisions**



SENATOR
SHAN S. TSUTSUI
Hawaii Senate President

**\$L:** Seven new members were elected to your chamber. How did they do?

**Tsutsui:** With the support

of experienced staff and veteran members, the new members learned quickly and contributed greatly. Each had fresh ideas and was eager to implement them quickly. Their enthusiasm helped to make my job as Senate president successful because, when faced with a severe budget shortfall, the new members were quick to collaborate with senior members of the Senate. They shared the same dedication and resolve to assist and improve the lives of those in the community.

**SL:** How challenging was the 2011 session? **Tsutsui:** Being entrusted by my colleagues to be the voice of the Hawaii Senate was daunt-

ing, especially as the state struggled through an economic downturn that saw declining revenues while fixed entitlement costs continued to rise. There were many unanticipated challenges—further increases in the budget shortfall, dealing with the economic aftermath of the tsunami in Japan, as well as many new challenges that come with being Senate president. Ultimately, my colleagues and I were able to unite and stand firm as a body, which allowed us to focus on ensuring the passage of a balanced budget.

**SL:** What was your top budget priority?

**Tsutsui:** Ensuring that we continued to support education and human service programs for our youth and most vulnerable constituents. The Legislature developed a balanced biennium budget to address a declining revenue landscape using two guiding principles: identify and support programs and services that are core and essential to the functioning of state government and make strategic investments in people and programs that encourage long-term economic growth, lower long-term future costs, and provide meaningful and efficient public services.

**SL:** How do you work with the other party? **Tsutsui:** The Hawaii Senate is unique because

the minority party is composed of only one senator. However, the minority still plays an integral role in shaping legislation by sitting on all 14 of the Senate's standing committees. Although partisan politics is portrayed nationally as a mudslinging contest, in Hawaii, the level of transparency and cooperation abounds. While the minority may not always prevail, his concerns are always carefully considered instead of simply being shut out. The Hawaii Senate also is unique because there is the constant struggle between Oahu legislators and those from neighbor islands. Oahu has 18 senators while the neighbor islands, of which I am part, are represented by only seven.

**SL:** Is it tough to promote respect for government today?

**Tsutsui:** Getting members of the public to have confidence in their legislators means the Senate allows members of our community to be involved in crafting legislation that represents the interests of all. From A to Z in the legislative process, I believe collaboration among not only fellow legislators but also members of the community—and not only the vocal majority—is the way to promote respect for democracy.



## **REPRESENTATIVE WILLIAM "BILL" O'BRIEN**

New Hampshire House Speaker

**SL:** What's the greatest challenge facing you in the 2012 session?

**O'Brien:** Placing a constitutional amendment on the ballot to ensure local control of education funding. For the past 15 years, the state has been subjected to

numerous lawsuits that have enabled the courts to direct education dollars. Our primary interest is to give the voters a chance to support keeping our school decisions and funding at the local level.

**SL:** You had a huge number of new members following the 2010 election. How did that affect your job?

**O'Brien:** When New Hampshire entered the 2011 session, more than 40 percent of the House members were new. This group represents a talented cross-section of the state, but any freshman group this size brings with it new challenges of getting these members up to speed quickly so they can maximize the value they add to the legislature. This is more pronounced in our state, where there is limited support staff, and volunteer legislators are paid only \$100 a year. Nonetheless, this group has had a major impact on legislation and helped shape a strong, fiscally conservative agenda.

**SL:** What was your top budget priority?

**O'Brien:** After more than 100 tax and fee increases in the previous four

years that added a growing burden to the backs of our job creators and citizens, the new legislature's top priority was to pass a balanced budget that did not raise any taxes or fees, and used realistic revenue estimates. This was especially challenging considering the loss of federal stimulus funding, but we were able to pass a budget that reduced state general fund expenditures by nearly 18 percent, increased no taxes and no fees, and maintained level funding for primary and secondary education.

**SL:** What advice would you give to the next leader?

**O'Brien:** Have a clear plan of what you want to accomplish and never lose sight of the big picture goals. It's tempting to follow the day-to-day aspects of politics and soon realize you have made no headway toward the transformative changes you believe are necessary to improve your state. Always remember distractions destroy more agendas than organized opposition.

**SL:** What would you be doing if you weren't in the legislature?

**O'Brien:** Since New Hampshire has a volunteer legislature, none of us is too far removed from our other careers and interests. We are all prepared to go back to our homes and jobs at any time. In my case, I would go back to my law practice.

These interviews have been edited for length and clarity.

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