



## State government? He wrote the book

*Bob Ward's decade-old study remains current – for good and ill*

*By Chris Bragg*

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At 611 pages, there doesn't seem to be any nook or cranny of New York State government that's not covered in Robert W. Ward's 2002 book, "New York State Government," which traces the beyond-Byzantine workings of the Empire State.

Ward's tome, which was updated with a new edition in 2006, was intended to educate the public on how citizens could influence their government, explain the relative powers of the various branches, and map the circulatory system of where tax dollars actually go. He explains how the state's vast network of agencies work, lays out the annual process in which the budget is assembled, traces the decades-long growth of public authority spending and dozens of other topics.

**Ward had a view of these matters from many fronts. He was a reporter at the Knickerbocker News before it was absorbed by the Times Union, then worked for the Assembly Ways & Means Committee, the state Business Council and SUNY's Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government, which published the book.**

His research tapped a number of veteran Albany figures, ranging along the ideological spectrum from E.J. McMahon of the fiscally conservative Empire Center to Blair Horner of the progressive New York Public Interest Research Group, plus longtime government experts such

as Robert Freeman of the state Committee on Open Government.

For its most recent update a decade ago, Ward included a chapter highlighting ethics reform in New York ahead of the governorship of Democrat Eliot Spitzer, the former attorney general and "Sheriff of Wall Street" who had promised to remake Albany by addressing issues like money in lobbying and political campaigns.

As of 2006, Ward noted, nine members of the Legislature had been charged with bribery or other crimes over the prior five years – all from New York City, where "voters are particularly unlikely to be aware of their representatives in the Senate or Assembly – let alone the activities of those individuals," he wrote.

A decade later, there have been several more attempts at reform, but an ongoing parade of scandals.

"It's important not just to change the laws, but what is the appropriate institutional culture," said Ward, who since 2012 has served as deputy comptroller of budget and policy analysis, in an interview. "There's a tendency to suggest you just need to change the law itself."

The book did not shy away from then-fresh controversies: Ward recounted lobbying by the media giant Cablevision, a company then controlled by the Dolan family of Long Island, to kill the controversial West Side Stadium in Manhattan. The company, which saw the proposed venue as a threat to the Dolan-owned Madison Square Garden, hired Kenneth Bruno, the son of Senate Majority Leader Joseph L. Bruno, and Patricia Lynch, a close ally of As-

sembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, to lucrative lobbying contracts.

Ten years later, Bruno has endured two corruption trials that ended with his acquittal (and has only recently become an author himself with the publication of his memoir "Keep Swinging"). Silver, meanwhile, is facing prison after his 2015 corruption conviction.

But while new actors have taken the stage, the plot lines have remained the same: Many of the endemic problems addressed by Ward persist.

In one poignant section near the end of the book, Ward addressed the role played by the media, and bemoaned that coverage tended to cover "non-substantive matters": polling in political campaigns, fundraising success or failure, or brush fire feuds between the Legislature and the governor.

Ward looked at the case of former Times Union managing editor Dan Lynch, who ran for the Assembly as a Democrat in 2000. Lynch, who cast himself as a maverick confronting an entrenched political machine, complained that an "almost total lack of attentiveness has made the press virtually irrelevant in informing the

voters who the candidates are and what they really stand for."

As a possible antidote, Ward suggested the press should pay attention to how well government is implementing policies and programs intended to improve public health, educate children and achieve other major goals.

"There are enormous amounts of information," Ward said this month. "How do we put that information in context?"

In many ways, Ward's book endures in large part because of the seemingly intractable problems that New York continues to face — such as the challenge of revitalizing the upstate economy — an effort that, projected out on the national stage, provided the post-industrial context for the rise of president-elect Donald Trump.

Still, Ward said it would be wrong to read the book a decade down the road and feel nothing but despair.

"Big changes do happen," Ward said. "Look at same-sex marriage. Big changes sometimes happen over time — and this year, they happened very quickly."