



Biben picked as new director of JCOPE

JCOPE has a new executive director as commissioners tap State Inspector General Ellen Biben to fill the position. But as Capital Tonight's Nick Reisman reports, there are questions about whether Biben can stay independent in her new role.

By Nick Reisman

February 2, 2012

NEW YORK STATE — The pick to run Albany's latest ethics watchdog is Ellen Biben, the State Inspector General and the appointment is raising eyebrows. Her hiring was approved in secret by the board of the Joint Commission on Public Ethics and she has close ties to Governor Andrew Cuomo, whose aides pushed for her to get the post. However, she has earned the thumbs up from good government groups.

"If it's possible she's going to be even more under the microscope because it's Albany, because it's JCOPE and its forerunner agency's problems over the years. So we expect she do a good job and she'll act independently," said NYPIRG Executive Director Russ Haven.

JCOPE, as it's known, has already been criticized for lacking transparency. Board Chairwoman Janet DiFiore came out of a closed-door session earlier this week in which commissioners voted to offer Biben the job, but did not mention the vote.

"That concludes the actions and completes the list of actions that must be reported out and

now I entertain a motion to adjourn today's meeting," DiFiore said.

No one, at least publicly, says they doubt Biben's ability to be an effective ethics cop. But her secret selection by JCOPE and the quiet lobbying done by the Cuomo administration to give her the job is part of a growing trend in which the governor has sought more authority. His newly formed Department of Financial Services has taken on much of the same duties as the attorney general and he's seeking more power in the budget to move money around without legislative approval.

"I think you do have to go back to Rockefeller to see a governor who has used the powers of the office so expansively," said Robert Ward, Deputy Director of the Rockefeller Institute.

More than one year in office, Cuomo has been an effective governor and that in turn has fueled his sky-high popularity thanks to his myriad accomplishments. However, the biggest stamp he's placing on the office may be his wielding of broad executive power.

"The question is should those powers be more centralized under the governor who was elected to oversee the public welfare generally? So it's an interesting political science debate and obviously playing out to some extent as a political debate," Ward said.