



OverviewNewsMayor's BioOfficials

Transcript: Mayor de Blasio Delivers Remarks At The 17th Annual David Dinkins Leadership And Public Policy Forum

April 25, 2014

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Thank you. Thank you very much. Please. Please.

Well, I have some things to say about my former boss Mayor Dinkins, and I'll do that in a moment. I have some things to say about what's happening in this city right now and where we're going. But first, let me observe the protocols in a very quick manner. But I want to give credit and thanks to the president of this great university, Lee Bollinger, for his leadership. I want to thank Merit Janow for her leadership of my alma mater at SIPA. I still – yes, there you go –

[Applause]

I want to commend – you have a really, an all-star panel today, of folks who are going to be talking about the issues at hand, including Ester Fuchs who escaped from city government and made it to Columbia University – or maybe – I guess went back and forth between the two. Jennifer Jones Austin, who did an incredible job co-chairing our transition, and I want to thank her for helping us build the team that we have today. Dick Ravitch, who's one of the greatest voices of fiscal responsibility – yet with a progressive soul – that you're going to find anywhere in this county. Bruce Ratner, who's done extraordinary things for Brooklyn, and for this city. I want to thank him for the work we've done together. Dorian Warren, a very powerful voice in our national debate, and MSNBC star. So, I said – should I tell them the new phrase that I coined? I said to Dorian backstage, I said the new thing is, "I appear on MSNBC, therefore I am." That is the new standard for our society.

I want to talk about the mayor, but... Mayor Dinkins is right. The loss of Basil Paterson is – if you've looked carefully at the history of this city over the last few decades, the history of this state – Basil Paterson is one of the people who really created the reality we now live, in terms

of some of the best, most progressive, most important developments. He played such an extraordinary role in everything that occurred on the way to the creation of the Dinkins administration, and during it, and in the aftermath, to sustain a lot of the progress we made. He played such a crucial role in helping to build the progressive labor movement in this city. Someone who didn't get headlines that in any way, shape or form correlated to the impact he made, but I can tell you, I was in this situation, as were so many others – we sought out Basil always. He was the wisest, he had a progressive activist soul, with the wisdom and the understanding of how things worked, and he was often the one guy who could tell us how to get there. So, he will be deeply missed, but I guarantee you, his thinking lives on with all of us.

Mayor Dinkins, I have to say the most obvious thing. I don't think I would be in this position today if it weren't for you. I don't think I could have done the things I did if you had not been willing to hire a young, impressionable SIPA graduate, learning my way – giving me, you gave me my first real chance in government. And I thought I was going to work for you – going into public service, per say, I did not know that was actually enrolling in a second degree program, because New York City Hall will teach you things very very quickly about the realities of public life, and it's an incredibly sobering, clarifying place – I would argue it may be the greatest graduate school in the world in that context. But what I learned, with the honor of serving Mayor Dinkins, I learned what was possible. I certainly learned, and we all learned, very difficult lessons about the roadblocks that are put in the way of any effort to foster greater equality, to reach people in need, to address some of the blatant biases and the discrimination that still pervades society. We, in the Dinkins years, had the honor of serving a leader who wanted to take those challenges on head on – and boy, he felt the impact of the opposition to the changes he sought to make. But in that process, all of us learned. That fight strengthened a lot of us. And a lot of us, instead of feeling, in the context of the challenge, that maybe public service was too hard, or too frustrating. A lot of us came out of the experience of the Dinkins years energized to go do more, to fulfill the vision that the mayor started to put into place. And so, Mr. Mayor, I want to thank you for being an inspiration to me, for having opened that door for me.

I want to most especially say, it's very simple when you can say what was the most important thing that happened in your life. Well the most important thing is that I worked for Mayor Dinkins and I was minding my own business one day, and a young woman walked up to me who was working in the City Hall press office, and I had never met her before. She asked me for some information. I looked up at her – as I like to say, I heard violins, I heard angels singing. Apparently a thunderbolt hit me. And Chirlane McCray did not feel any of those things. It took a substantial process for me to encourage her to feel any of that whatsoever. But eventually, it all worked out. And because of Mayor Dinkins, I met my wife of now 20 years. And if you appreciate my daughter Chiara's strong soul, and her forceful desire to make this world better, and if you appreciate my son Dante's incredible gravitas at the age of 16, and his epic hair, then yes, you should thank Chirlane, but really you have to thank Mayor Dinkins for making it all possible. So, thank you Mayor Dinkins.

And, Mayor Dinkins referenced my good friend Herbert Block – it's true, I just want to say to any of the students in the room: life is serendipitous. I was working at a non-profit. Someone heard that someone heard that they had a friend of a friend who was looking for someone to take a job on the Mondale campaign in 1984. That's precisely how I got to the Mondale campaign in 1984, met Herbert Block, and then one day he said – hey, David Dinkins is about to announce for mayor, you should come join us. And yes, I did go to interview with Bill Lynch, and Bill Lynch – extraordinary, like Basil Paterson, one of the people who did extraordinary things for this city, taught a whole generation of us how to do this work. We reference him to this day, to this hour, in the work we do, a lot of us quote him frequently because it's so present. I think a lot of people in this room have been to job interviews. Sometimes you get that curveball question. My opening question from Bill Lynch that day in 1989, he looks at me, he looks me up and down, pauses and says, "What do you know about New York City politics?" And I thought, "Wow, that's open ended." So I struggled to offer a few thoughts, I guess it was sufficient, and here I am.

One other thing I wanted to say, as I reflect on the journey that led me to Mayor Dinkins, I had an important experience at SIPA, even though what I studied at the time – I studied Latin American affairs, I thought that was the direction I was going in. Obviously things changed. My wife always says to me that a masters in International Affairs is necessary to be Mayor of New York City, given the incredible diversity of this city, and given that we're such a global capital. But I will tell you, in those days at SIPA, I ended up learning more about the industrialization of Mexico than I ever imagined I would, and many other fascinating topics, and it built a foundation – in ways that I couldn't realize until much later – that allowed me some of the insights, to be able to first survive, and then I hope thrive, in the maelstrom that was City Hall, first as a staffer, and now in this role today.

What we saw then, and I want to link it to what I want to talk about today, what we saw then was that there, in the vein of leadership, there's very little to be said, in my opinion, for too much devotion to incrementalism, or too much self-editing, self-limitation. Mayor Dinkins came into a situation – was handed a situation – with a truly rampant crime problem. There were a lot of ways to look at what could be done. There was a lot of cynicism at that time, a lot of sense that perhaps our reality was just part of our lives, and wasn't going to change. Mayor Dinkins had the audacity to say we could in fact address the problem, but it would take an entirely different kind of investment. And he suggested very boldly a program called Safe Streets Safe City. This may be reminiscent to some of you – it was a bold program, it was going to cost a substantial amount of money, it was going to greatly change lives of people in this city, and it required the approval of Albany. And, many many people said that would be impossible. Mayor Dinkins, to his great credit, persevered, and we got that program passed, and it was the beginning, the foundation – I want to make this very clear, not just a beginning in the small step sense – the foundation of everything that happened thereafter, the 20 years

of extraordinary progress on public safety in this city. It would not have happened if Mayor Dinkins had said, guys, we just can't go that far. The market won't bear it. We have to take small steps. Maybe we could pilot something here or try something there. It only happened because he said, we have to go the whole distance right now.

So, if you appreciate how safe this city is, and I guarantee you, we're working every single day to keep crime low, to continue to ensure that this is a safe city, and to repair the relationship with police – between police and community simultaneously. And yes, those two things can be done at once. If you appreciate the safety of this city, if you appreciate 20 years of sustained progress, then join with me for a moment to applaud the man who got it all started, Mayor Dinkins.

[Applause]

Now this segues into what I want to talk about leadership and I think I have to contextualize it very briefly by saying this is a time in history where I think the bold are needed. The fact is at the local level we've been handed a series of challenges. We don't have a lot of natural allies in the way we might've in the past – the most evident missing link is the federal government. So for cities around the country, there's often a sense of we have what we have to address our problems. We have each other in the sense of a lot of cities have common interests, are working together. But we don't have the federal partner we usually had in the past. We have it only from time to time now. And so, in that sense it links back to the question of well, in the face of such intense challenges as we face today – the crucial challenges of income inequality, the environmental challenges, the infrastructure challenges – we could say we are therefore reduced to less because we don't have the partnership and support we deserve. Or, alternately, we could say we have to go create a new paradigm. We have to do it on the ground city by city. We have to create something that then bubbles up and changes the debate around us and above us and changes the rules of the game.

I think that is the prescription and, in fact, the only path we have. And it, again, would be tempting to say in light of these challenges, don't over commit, don't try and go too far, look at your limitations. But that's a luxury we cannot afford because the problems are so great we have no choice but to push the spectrum to find out just how much each city can achieve on its own and what the linking of those efforts might mean for all of us.

And I don't say this without reference to history. I think it's clear in so much of history that the changes come from the grassroots, the changes come because there's a demand. I was very

gratified by what the dean said about our campaign seeming more like a social movement than a campaign – that’s the ultimate compliment. And that, to me, has a ring of truth because I think what we’ve always believed – what I’ve always seen – is if you develop and channel the demands of the people on the ground that is your greatest prospect for some kind of real, lasting social change. It’s not typical of governmental structures to be ahead of the people – it’s typical that those structures have to be pushed by the people to the places that actually the policies, the changes actually reflect a response to the lives of the people on the ground.

So, first, I work from the assumption that the grassroots ultimately are where the action. And that correlates to the notion that cities have a particular role to play because we are simply closer to the ground, more connected to the people we serve. We feel the urgency of their needs and their demands. And if we channel that accurately, it leads us to action.

But history also grounds us because, in this state in particular, we had the best examples – I would argue in all of American history – of innovation, creativity, audacity in the face of crisis. We – I’m going to talk for just a brief moment about some of the titans of this state’s history – people like Al Smith and Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Fiorello La Guardia – and I want to say it because at the time they were entirely in uncharted territory. It’s easy today to look at this history and think, Oh, these were great men, great accomplishments, framed so much of our lives to this day. The work of those three is reverberating around this city as we speak. The core accomplishments of Franklin Delano Roosevelt frame everyday life in America today. But at the time, each of them was somewhere on an uncharted path, surrounded by critics and cynics, without a map, and innovating things that previously had not even existed – and I hope that is felt deeply. Not adding to a particular current policy or amending or burnishing, but creating whole new veins, whole new ideas about what government should do for people, could do for people. And there’s an audacity in that, there’s a quality of inventiveness and creativity, which I hope all of us in public service cherish and strive for.

And so, look at the examples, because they’re quite striking. Al Smith – he could’ve been a typical machine politician – that’s the milieu he came out of – and he comes up through the ranks but he was an extraordinarily gifted man and he had a good set of eyes and ears and he saw the world around him. He saw the overcrowded tenements. He saw working conditions that were fundamentally dangerous. Famously, he witnessed one of the greatest tragedies in the history of this city – the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire. It was 103 years ago. And he saw 146 people die because of unsafe working conditions – primarily immigrant women. And Al Smith went much farther than the conventional wisdom would’ve dictated or that his trajectory would’ve suggested – and that was not just how he became governor of this state, but he, based on his actual life experience, increasingly believed there had to be a response from government. An unacceptable set of dynamics existed. And government had to go places it had not gone. And he pushed through a flurry of labor reforms and was one of the great

innovators. Notions like making factories safe, making sure there were exits, making sure there were sprinklers. He was one of the leaders in efforts to reform working hours and child labor. And all this came from his experience. And a lot of it at the time – I know it sounds impossible to believe right now – a lot of it at the time was highly controversial. A lot of it at the time seemed undoable – or, if it was to be done, it would be done over a long period of time. But he sensed the urgency of the need, he sensed the moment where change could happen, and he pressed with extreme intensity. And suddenly the entire playing field was reset – the entire set of assumptions were reset. And he was followed in office by Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who, again, if you looked at this history, you might not have expected what you ultimately got.

Obviously, a man of means – not someone who had previously distinguished himself as a particularly aggressive reformer, but he had a great mind and he had an incredible empathy. And when this country experienced its worst economic crisis in our history in the Great Depression, you can imagine the sense of confusion, the feeling that pervaded this country that suddenly we were all lost together. I've talked to – over the years – to my older relatives who went through those years. I've talked to people for whom it was 40, 50 years in the past and yet in their voices was a sense – a very present urgent sense – that everyone suddenly felt unmoored and they didn't know a way out. And Roosevelt suggested – first in New York State – he showed there was a way that government could actually reach out, provide immediate relief to people, play a role in getting people back to work – do things that had never been in the purview of government before on any appreciable scale. First, he showed it could be done by a state. That encouraged, energized the whole nation to start thinking differently. And then, upon his elevation to the presidency, he literally redefined the notion of our federal government and the notion of the role of government in general in our society. And if you look at those times – if you look at the speed with which Roosevelt and his team were innovating, all of it reaching out into the unknown and creating structures and ideas, pushing forward to places that people hadn't been before but having the faith that the response was what was needed.

And that's what so brilliant about all of this set of leaders. They started with the assumption that the one thing that was absolutely unacceptable was lack of response to people's needs – that silence or inaction was the most unacceptable possibility. And that they would build, they would experiment – sometimes they would fail. But that there had to be a clear, forward motion visible to all and that that was, in one measure, about solving people's material needs and in another measure about re-engendering hope.

I love to brag about a book – I liked the author so much I hired him – Adam Cohen. The book is called 'Nothing to Fear.' It's about the group of advisors and leaders around Roosevelt in those 100 days, those famous 100 days. And I urge everyone to read it because you see, you get a look inside the laboratory, inside the workshop, as people literally were creating whole

ideas – things like social security and Medicaid and all the ideas that have come over time – the Civilian Conservation Corp. They didn't exist before – they had to make them up on the spot – but that willingness to do that is what turned this country around.

And finally, with La Guardia – no disrespect to Mayor Dinkins, no disrespect to me – but I think Fiorello La Guardia will always be our most beloved mayor. And I think the reason is that in that maelstrom, in that moment of profound crisis, he provided a way forward and he did, of course, with a particular personality and energy that epitomizes all that's good about New York.

But remember, La Guardia's in the same exact moment as Roosevelt, the same exact crisis. It's hitting here in a profound way because the financial industry based here has collapsed. So many of the assumptions this city was built on were suddenly wobbly. So much poverty, so much pain, and LaGuardia says, I'm going to take what Roosevelt has started and I'm going to do it here. And we're going to do our own version of it, and we're going to create whole new things that haven't been seen at the local level. So he not only took the strands of the New Deal and made them real and vivid in New York City, and prove they could work and helped create the groundwork for them to work elsewhere in the country – he was that perfect partner for Roosevelt, taking the big ideas, the big [inaudible], and making them real and local and tangible for people in need. But on top of that, he decided to create whole new structures of his own, like the New York City Housing Authority. And to put it in perspective, Fiorello LaGuardia created the New York City Housing Authority, which today houses almost half a million people. He did that one month after taking office in the middle of the greatest economic crisis in the history of this country. So that's the kind of audacity that actually changes things and changes them in a lasting way.

Let me take you quickly to the present day. I wish there weren't so many parallels but there are. The greatest economic crisis in this history of the country, the Great Depression, the second greatest – I don't think it's particularly arguable, I think it's clear it was the economic crisis that we experienced over the last five, six years. We don't need to be reminded of the depth of that crisis. We don't need to be reminded how many people are hurting. We don't need to be reminded that income inequality is at its greatest point since the Great Depression, and growing. But of course, we get reminded more and more and the proof keeps coming out. So just in the last week, you may have seen the international study reported in the New York Times pointing out that the American middle class that had been the exemplar of the world was no longer the strongest middle class on this globe. It was starting to decline in the international perspective.

A further proof of that, which we've all been feeling now over decades, is a profound decline of what was supposed to be the foundation of the country and was for decades: our middle class weakening all the time. For folks who are lower income, the situation even worse. The middle of my campaign last year, I was talking about a tale of two cities. I was arguing the case – I was arguing the things we had to do, and right in the middle of that, the city government report came out showing that 46 percent, 46 percent of New Yorkers were at or near the poverty level. And for a lot of people, it seemed impossible until you did the math and looked at the fact that with constant downward pressure on wages and benefits, and the kind of cost of living we have here, it was inevitable that more and more people would fall behind and would start to approach levels that only can be described as poverty.

Against that backdrop, we said okay, we come into office with a notion that our forbearers are exemplars, did things boldly, they did them audaciously, they did them quickly because there was no other choice. They didn't wait. They didn't wait for some other force to step in. They didn't worry that it might not all be perfect, or the criticisms that would come from any missteps. They said if we don't experiment and act now, if we don't press forward, if we don't create – that pain only deepens. And our job is to try to respond to relieve the pain and the suffering of our people.

So in our way, we've tried humbly – in smaller, less dramatic ways, but I hope important ways – to follow that good example from our forbearers. We passed legislation to provide paid sick leave to a half million more New Yorkers, because that's something –

[Applause]

That's something that provides a little more economic security. A little bit more ability for people to have consistency in their pay, a little more relief when people are sick. We went to Albany and after a long and often dramatic fight, we got funding for full-day pre-K for every child in this city.

[Applause]

And that will change people's lives. Because for hardworking people, a little more security – knowing their child will get a strong start, knowing they won't have to pay from a bank account that doesn't have much left in it – that they'll get that for free. It's something they can depend on, it's something that'll build their child's life and by the way, will give their child a greater

possibility of being economically vital later on in their own lives. Some greater chance at fairness and equality because the educational foundation was strong and equal. In a few days, we're going to announce the details of a plan to create 200,000 units of affordable housing for this city.

[Applause]

I imagine a number of people in this room would like to sign up for the opportunity to partake of that affordable housing, because if I could tell you every time I go around this city – I went all last year – every time I went on the subway to this day, the thing that people raise the most is that need for affordable housing, that fear of being priced out of the city they love. That deep, deep desire to stay here with their family and friends and be a part of this, but that sense that it may be slipping away. Our response, as big and as bold as we can possibly reach, 200,000 units over ten years. Some people call it difficult, some people call it ambitious, a few kind people have called it slightly crazy. We say it is the outer limit and that's what we have to reach for, and we know we'll get there if we demand it of ourselves.

[Applause]

And addressing inequality takes many forms. One is so particularly urgent and deeply felt are those pieces that are about economics, but there's so many others. What we're doing with pre-K and after school programs is about addressing educational inequality as well. What we're doing, in terms of relationship between police and community, is to address a whole other set of inequalities and injustices that needed a response. And by the way, I always felt – I always felt – that if we brought police and community closer together, that if we created policies that instead of shunning and degrading our young men of color, uplifted and supported and respected them, that we would have a stronger and safer society.

[Applause]

And so, we have made fundamental reforms. We've moved away from the broken stop-and-frisk policy.

[Applause]

We've ended practices around racial profiling and surveillance that were clearly unfair. And you know what? Crime continues to stay low. And people can feel that they, every single day, are working more closely with the police. And so the critics – the critics suggested a whole series of dangerous possibilities and unintended consequences if we were to go down that audacious path. But we went there because we knew it was necessary. Because we heard the voices of people, because we heard the challenges they faced every day, and we had faith that addressing peoples' needs would actually lead us to a safer place, and we see it before our very eyes. And we know that in this city, this most diverse of cities, the ultimate immigrant city, the place that epitomizes the notion of immigration and diversity as a strength, we know that we have a half million of our fellow New Yorkers who happen to be undocumented. And we have to embrace them, and so we'll create a municipal ID program to dignify them and give them opportunity as well.

[Applause]

I'll finish with this thought. All of the challenges around us require that strong, consistent response. They require creativity, and I marvel at the creativity of those who came before us. And I aspire just to reach some of their level, and hope I can follow in their footsteps modestly. But I'll tell you something, some of it's just listening and feeling what we're going through. I'll give you another example. We have, obviously, a crisis of climate change and there are things we can do about it and it's not just a big insurmountable international problem – it is ultimately a problem that comes down to every country, every state, every city. And the question is, are we doing all we can, locally, and in our lives as individuals to address it? And that parallels this crisis of economic inequality. And again, we can through up our hands in the face of that, or we can say we have real tools in government to address that like some of those that we've started to implement.

Well I think those two strands have to go together. We're going to fight the problems of climate change, we're going to fight for a cleaner environment, while simultaneously addressing the economic difficulties of our people and the deepening of income inequality. We have to see environmental sustainability in the same vein as economic sustainability – we have to marry those two ideas. And so, one of the things I look forward to doing is retrofitting our public buildings. We've got a lot of them. Our public schools, our public housing authority buildings – retrofitting those and guess what? Hiring people from those neighborhoods, from those developments to do the work.

We're addressing the aftermath in the same vein – we're addressing the aftermath of Sandy. So many people still afflicted, so many people who came from working class neighborhoods, poor neighborhoods. Thank god there's some federal funding to address this. And guess what? Let's use that money to hire people affected by the storm to fix their own homes, their own neighborhoods.

So that's how we bring the strands together.

And so long as we believe that audacity is the path we're called to, that we can solve a lot more locally than we're given credit for, all of us have to remember if we're not given a meaningful response from the highest level of our national government, it's an open invitation to us to create, to believe in ourselves, to believe in what we might do, to realize we don't have a choice but to press ahead, to see how far our creativity might take us, to see what might be out there we have not yet realized, and, ultimately, to know that perhaps our example, our audacity, our unwillingness to retreat will someday animate a bigger discussion, a bigger debate, will someday light a fire underneath our public servants in Washington and convince them that it's their obligation to respond, despite their partisan differences, despite their career needs, to actually find a meaningful response for the people of this country. Until that day, in the vein of so many of our young people in neighborhoods like Williamsburg and Bushwick, we'll do it ourselves, we'll make something happen here, we'll show it can be done, we'll honor our obligation to our own people, and we'll remember there's a rich, rich history of the people knowing what the problem is well before the public debate acknowledges it, of the people seeing the solution well before the leaders feel comfortable embracing it or safe embracing it, the people leading and the leaders eventually following. We want to spark that notion in all we do. The people are demanding something of us. Their leadership has to be honored, their voice has to be honored.

I finish with a quote that I love from a quintessential New Yorker, the great playwright Tony Kushner who wrote in his extraordinary play 'Angels in America' – a simple, simple notion he put forward – he said, "The world only spins forward."

We just have to recognize that. We have to capture that energy and momentum and provide the kind of changes the people simply demand of us.

Thank you.

pressoffice@cityhall.nyc.gov

(212) 788-2958

News

Statement on the Grow America Act

APR 29, 2014

First Lady Chirlane Mccray Announces Confirmation of Meredith Horsford a

APR 29, 2014

Statement by Mayor Bill de Blasio on Yom Hashoah

APR 28, 2014

Statement by Mayor de Blasio on the State Assembly's Vote on Speed Cam

APR 28, 2014

Transcript: Mayor de Blasio Delivers Remarks at Comptroller Dinapoli's Pre

APR 28, 2014

Mayor Announces Immediate Expansion of Rental Assistance for Low-Incor

APR 28, 2014

City Reaches Agreement on Space for Three Charter Schools

APR 26, 2014

Mayor de Blasio Signs Legislation to Alter The New York City Building Code

APR 25, 2014

Transcript: Mayor de Blasio Delivers Remarks at the Regional Planning Ass

APR 25, 2014

Transcript: Mayor de Blasio Signs Legislation to Alter The New York City Bu

APR 25, 2014

Transcript: Mayor Delivers Remarks 17th Annual David Dinkins Leadership

APR 25, 2014

Mayor de Blasio Appoints Julie Menin as Commissioner of Department of C

APR 24, 2014