

Politically Neutral Politics and the Man Who Gave New Meaning to the Mayoralty

By Jerry F. Cammarata

Former Speaker of the House Thomas P. “Tip” O’Neill is credited with popularizing the axiom that “all politics are local.”

Rudy Giuliani has proven that just the opposite is true: the more local the issue, the less political – at least in the sense of partisanship – it is likely to be.

Local problems don’t respond well to invocations of hackneyed slogans or the inflexible tenets of a philosophy spouted by doctrinaire party apologists. Global problems don’t respond well to these either, and the American electorate – which has lately been fleeing party labels and demanding solutions that really work instead of lip-service to parochial interest groups – is way ahead of most leaders of the major parties. Giuliani, who never ran for elective office before he chose to strike out for New York’s mayoralty and who has never been seen as a loyalist of a particular political faction, was wise enough to spot this disaffection in the populace and to run his campaigns, and now his city, on a

platform of doing the best for his people no matter what label that gives him or which splinter group he offends.

In less than four years as mayor of the City of New York, Giuliani has smashed through the frozen landscape of traditional alliances like an icebreaker plowing through the Northwest Passage, and has successfully bucked the leadership of both major parties and a number of minor ones to put forward programs that work. A Republican who ran with strong Liberal support, he confounds the facile analysis of talk-show pundits. A mayor with a pro-immigration policy, he shocks columnists by supporting Conservative Party candidates for local office. A protector of the free market, he lobbies for rent control.

In short, he both reflects and leads a national renewal of civic philosophy and has revolutionized the art of governance in New York City.

Politicians, take note! Candidates, take heed! The process of getting – and staying – elected has changed, and the electorate likes it. Thanks to a new breed of public citizens like Giuliani, politics will no longer be the battling of benighted armies of partisans who brandish slogans on behalf of the status quo, but the management of the people's business by un-pigeon-hole-able custodians armed with creativity and imagination.

Let's take a look at a few examples. Giuliani is, of course, a Republican, and has made no secret of his intention to make New York City "business-friendly," a trite phrase in the mouths of most magistrates, but one that has real meaning in this administration. He has made great progress toward this goal by reducing wasteful and meaningless red-tape, and by setting up the mechanisms and structures that provide businesses with services they truly need, actions typically associated with old-fashioned Republicanism. However, in a

very un-Republican move, he has fought major commercial enterprises to restore competition in basic service industries where virtual monopolies have long choked off other commerce – for instance, in the private trash removal business which affects every small business owner, and at the world-renown Fulton Fish Market and Hunts Point Produce Market, both of which supply nearly all the restaurants in the city.

Though his overall approach to commerce may be roughly categorized as Republican, he has promoted business not for the sake of enriching the few, but so that the many may have greater access to the products of a consumer society and may participate more fully in the wealth of the nation. His “mega-stores” initiative, which has attracted a number of warehouse-style supermarkets and home improvement franchises to New York, has given the poorest citizens of the Big Apple a place to shop with significantly lower prices and a greater variety of products. Oddly enough, Giuliani had to face the wrath of many Democrats in the City Council when he tried to encourage this kind of business-building in the city’s poorer communities, an odd turn of events given the enthusiastic reception his programs in this area got from leading lights of the Liberal Party.

The real estate industry in New York has long been associated with Republican interests, and Giuliani’s struggle to free those who would invest in New York from pointless regulations and duplicative document preparation requirements would seem to put him squarely in line with the conservative philosophy of freeing up the free market. On the other hand, with millions of New Yorkers panicked by the fear that their lives will be turned topsy-turvy by profit-hungry landlords, Giuliani took on his own Republican Party’s conservative leadership in Albany, and some of the city’s largest real estate interests, to lobby on behalf of the continuation of some kind of rent regulations.

Giuliani is able to undertake these battles in part because his own political base is so unique that it stands of itself, without the underpinnings of party machines. The man who nearly single-handedly disassembled the Democratic machine that ran New York in the Koch years, is being endorsed by scores of prominent, committed Democrats, including a large number of Democrats from the City Council, with whom he has had more than one fight. He backed Mario Cuomo for governor, but has endorsed members of the Conservative Party for elections to City posts. In this way Giuliani has managed to stay politically neutral in running this city. He has shown the wisdom it takes to make his decisions reflect what is valuable to the people of New York, not what party politicians would like to see happen.

By staying focused on what works, particularly on what works fiscally (for really, both municipalities and national governments show their true priorities in their budgets and have their greatest impact through the agencies and programs they fund), Giuliani has found a politics that transcends divisions of race or ethnicity, and that cuts across social segments. Common sense and quality management is the only platform for Giuliani's political tribe, and as a result his challengers have yet to find any effective argument against his re-election.

Giuliani's zoning and business proposals, his work-fare efforts and his reforms of calcified bureaucracies, will have lasting effects in this city, but chances are that he will be best remembered for the real Rudy Revolution, when parties and partisanship melted away and they were replaced by a flexible responsiveness to the true needs – not the whims or the appetites – of the people. The Giuliani era will be remembered as one when the city

was not governed by political people, but when the people governed the politics, and that kind of politics is the best kind – locally, nationally or globally.