

public financing systems road-tested in Arizona, Maine and Connecticut, Fair Elections Now polls favorably across the political spectrum and counts two brave Republican House members—Walter Jones of North Carolina and Todd Platts of Pennsylvania—among its ninety-five co-sponsors.

Fair Elections Now allows citizens of modest wealth to wage credible campaigns without kowtowing to lobbyists, bundlers, and corporate and financial insiders. It should be Item One in an agenda of reforms designed to clean up Congressional elections.

Item Two, whose urgency is becoming more apparent by the hour, is to confront the monster unleashed by the *Citizens United* decision: the pseudo-independent money machines known as Super PACs, which have lately been set loose by and against Mitt Romney and Newt Gingrich, but which can be counted on to work much of their mayhem against progressives.

The eventual answer, unless the federal courts change their tune, will have to be a constitutional amendment curtailing the political rights of corporations. In the meantime, though, the damage could be contained through measures to bar political spending by government contractors and to compel large donors to identify themselves in political commercials (two provisions of a bill backed by New York Senator Charles Schumer and Maryland Congressman Chris Van Hollen); and to guarantee director and shareholder review of all corporate spending decisions (the thrust of a bill backed by Michael Capuano of Massachusetts in the House along with New Jersey's Robert Menendez and Connecticut's Richard Blumenthal in the Senate).

Congress could also go a long way toward cleaning up its act by setting a three-year minimum hiatus between legislative service and anything that smacks of lobbying; putting an end to the holds, filibusters and other practices that allow small minorities or even lone wing nuts to keep measures of wide interest from being debated or voted on; and adopting serious

conflict-of-interest rules, so that legislators would no longer be allowed to vote on measures or serve on committees affecting industries or entities from which they have received significant financial or political benefits.

These ideas already command the support of a long list of unions and civil rights, environmental and democracy reform groups. It is time for them to sit down and agree on a Congressional reform agenda and then work hard to convince candidates not only to sign on but to advocate for such a program relentlessly, passionately and memorably, first as they campaign and later (for those who win) as they serve.

Such an appeal could find quite a few takers this year among incumbents as well as challengers struggling to find a way to run, with heads held high, for an institution held in near-universal scorn. The point, of course, is not to get such a package adopted in the next, or any immediately foreseeable, Congress but to gradually establish it as the test of a serious commitment to institutional reform.

Eventually, we can hope to build the kind of pressure that led to the direct election of senators a century ago, or to the McCain-Feingold campaign reform law (a worthy model strategically if not substantively) in 2002. Like the champions of those measures, we will need to be patient. The long-term goal is to change the system. In the here and now, a Fix Congress campaign is about changing the national discourse and psychology by redirecting Americans' anger away from cynicism and disdain for government and feelings of futility about the whole idea of collective action for the common good.

If, amid all the real and illusory stakes of an election campaign, we can muster some energy and attention for the task of getting Americans to start thinking about what ails Congress, and what must eventually be done to get it to work for regular people, that could turn out to be as big as anything else within our power to accomplish this year. ■

Making Cities Matter

John Lindsay's New York—and what it can teach us about neglected urban problems.

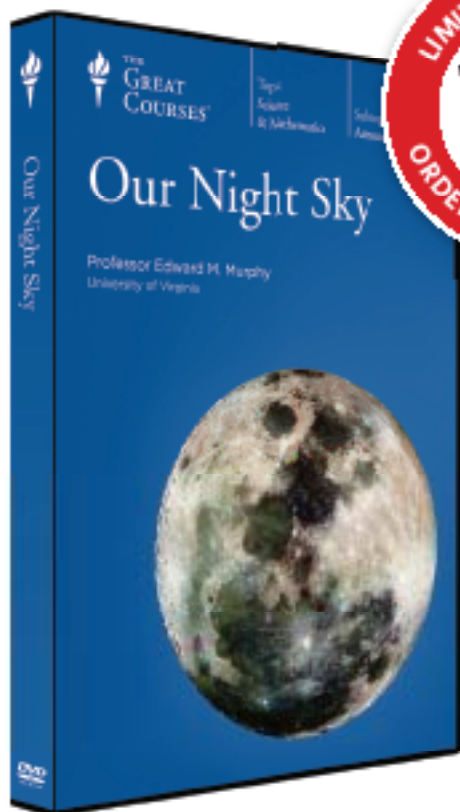
by JOSEPH P. VITERITTI

There has been a recent flurry of interest in John Lindsay, the former Congressman who was mayor of New York from 1966 through 1973. He has been the subject of a special exhibit at the Museum of the City of New York, a documentary film produced by WNET and a book edited by Sam Roberts of the *New York Times*. A liberal Republican who later switched parties to run for president, Lindsay became a prominent figure on the national stage as a spokesman for urban America when cities were being denigrated for their poverty, crime and racial strife. His efforts on behalf of racial minorities and the poor made him a controversial figure, not only in his own

party but also among local Democrats, who did not appreciate his attempts to integrate blacks and Hispanics into the ethnic enclaves that controlled city politics.

History has not been kind to Lindsay. The handsome young mayor who could calmly walk the streets of Harlem on the evening that Martin Luther King Jr. was killed while other cities burned has never been able to pass the scrutiny of scholars without taking a few whacks. His politics could be inflammatory. His attempts to appoint a Civilian Review Board in the Police Department and put angry militants on community school boards divided the city along racial lines. Because of his generous labor contracts and a redistributive agenda that exceeded city revenues, Lindsay has shared blame for the 1975 fiscal crisis, which brought New York to the brink of bankruptcy.

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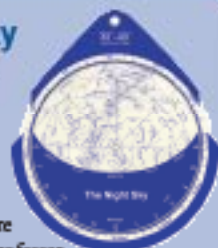
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Accounting charades dating back to Mayor Robert Wagner were partly responsible for the unraveling of the city's finances. Used to justify the city's reliance on short-term debt, the gimmicks were not just dysfunctional; they were illegal. New York had historically assumed financial responsibility for services rarely found in municipal budgets, such as hospitals and higher education. State regulations required the city to pay an unusually large share of welfare and Medicare costs. Things had to change.

As a result of managerial and financial reforms that Governor Hugh Carey imposed between 1975 and 1978, New York recuperated from fiscal calamity. Over the long term, however, not everybody has benefited from the recovery. And something larger has been lost, since the gritty politics of the '60s that bred so much turmoil had put the city on a more just course. If New York and other cities were condemned for harboring so many of the country's problems, they also sparked its conscience. John

Lindsay became a spokesman for people in the cities who had been marginalized by politics and the economy.

Lindsay was more than a mayor. As vice chair of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders appointed by President Lyndon Johnson, he was a spokesman for people who had been marginalized by politics and the economy.

The post-fiscal crisis correction was both financial and political. Some urban scholars had determined that New York City was "ungovernable" because it had fallen victim to a malady called "interest group liberalism," which rendered vote-hungry politicians powerless when faced with excessive demands by unions, welfare advocates and other organized groups. Governor Carey appointed an Emergency Financial Control Board dominated by bankers and corporate executives that could resist ordinary political pressures to overspend.

More sympathetic political economists concluded that local governments lacked the fiscal capacity to fund redistributive services for the poor, so they suggested that such burdens be borne by the federal and state governments, which had broader taxing power. Municipalities were advised to focus on police, safety and maintenance functions; state and local governments were urged to put more effort into economic development. National welfare reforms later enacted by the Clinton administration succeeded in moving people off public assistance and into jobs. Between 1996 and 2010, the welfare rolls in New York City decreased from 1.2 million to 350,000. The drop was part of a national trend in which the caseload went from 12.6 million recipients to 4.6 million.

Now, as Wall Street becomes an epicenter for protest as well as profits, some of the priorities Lindsay set in the spirit of President Johnson's Great Society are again timely. Post-fiscal crisis New York is a more orderly place for sure. In the midst of prosperity, however, the city and the country are experiencing unprecedented levels of political and economic inequality.

Government, at all levels, is incapable of responding because it is dominated by the same corporate and financial sectors that benefit from the status quo.

For a time the city's future looked promising, but now with the economy in a tailspin, there are fewer jobs. The national unemployment rate is 8.5 percent. The federal tax code is more regressive than ever. Since 1975 the tax rate for people in the highest bracket has been cut in half. Last summer, the federal government itself came close to defaulting on its debt, and for the first time in history saw its credit rating drop. With state governments reeling from federal cutbacks and the general economic decline, governors and legislatures are telling constituents they need to accept sacrifice.

As the protesters in Zuccotti Park remind us, taxpayers footed the bill to save the very institutions whose executives created the mortgage crisis. Investment banks, oil companies and other large corporations are still hauling in huge profits. Congress addressed the debt crisis last year by agreeing to cut trillions in spending, yet it simultaneously protected the tax privileges of the wealthy.

While Wall Street hedge-fund managers garner obscene bonuses, one in five New York residents lives in poverty. The unemployment rate is 9.1 percent. A recent survey by the Fiscal Policy Institute indicates that the income gap among New Yorkers is wider than ever. In 1980 the top 1 percent of earners collected 12 percent of all income, which was pretty much on par with the rest of the country. By 1990 the top 1 percent had a 20 percent share; and by 2007 it had leapt to 44 percent, almost double the historically high national level. New York has the widest disparity in income among the largest twenty-five cities in the United States.

Between 1980 and 2007, incomes of city residents at the bottom half of the earning spectrum (those below \$33,000) actually declined. The take for those in the top 1 percent (more than \$580,000) grew 7 percent annually. While the income share of the top 1 percent doubled between 1990 and 2007, the median hourly wage fell 8.6 percent. To have widespread deprivation in the face of such wealth is perverse. Nonetheless, politicians at the local, state and federal levels vow to protect loopholes in the law that let the richest pay the lowest tax rates.

This is a far cry from 1964, when President Johnson declared his war on poverty. There was something fundamentally decent about a government that assumed responsibility for helping the needy. The strategy behind Johnson's Great Society involved more than redistributive policies. It sought to engage underrepresented people in politics with initiatives, like the Community Action Program and Model Cities, that demanded "maximum feasible participation" of the poor in local programs. Johnson understood that a strong democracy could not thrive so long as people languished in poverty and were left on the sidelines of the political process. By 1970 unemployment in New York had bottomed out at 3.2 percent and the poverty rate had sunk to 14.2 percent.

No American mayor embraced the Great Society agenda with more enthusiasm than John Lindsay. He campaigned in Albany

to get more aid for the city, circumvented the rigid civil service system to provide more jobs for minorities, and created his own network of task forces and neighborhood city halls to foster greater community participation in government. Community boards that now allow neighborhood residents to have a say in land use, budgeting and service delivery are a legacy of his administration. While few would want to return to the decentralized school board structure that evolved after the racial confrontations in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, many parents complain that there are no avenues for meaningful involvement under the current structure of mayoral control.

New York's fiscal crisis of 1975 changed everything, but not always for the better. It drastically altered the way Americans thought about cities. Nineteenth-century cities were expected to serve as engines of democracy; twenty-first-century cities are expected to serve as engines of prosperity. Democracy is incompatible with inequality. Inequality can be the price paid when cities go too far to give tax breaks to corporations and make up the difference by cutting programs for the poor.

As far back as Thomas Jefferson's time, local government had been the place where people learned about community life, where neighbors acquired civic consciousness. New York took Jefferson's idealistic localism to a new level. A major function of the older city was to convert newcomers into viable citizens. For generations, the political machines of New York succeeded in incorporating European immigrants into the political lifeblood of the city and gave them employment in its strapping municipal agencies. A tradition of generosity that grew out of the voluntary sector laid the foundation for a supportive system of hospitals and social services.

During the postwar migration, Northern cities were a destination for blacks fleeing discrimination in the South and for poor immigrants seeking a better life. Today blacks are moving back to the South, and immigrants are bypassing New York City to live in the suburbs. The gentrified city is also a city more hollowed out civically. Between 2000 and 2010, the absentee rate of owned apartments in Manhattan increased 70 percent. On the Upper East Side between Forty-ninth and Seventieth Streets, 30 percent of the apartments are vacant ten months a year; between East Fifty-third and East Fifty-ninth Streets, half are vacant because the superrich have other homes. Such absenteeism undermines vibrant democracy. It creates an aristocracy whose involvement in political life consists mostly of writing a check.

Today less than 30 percent of those who are eligible vote

in New York City elections, a twenty-point drop since 1980. Participation rates are much lower among those with modest incomes. Campaign spending, however, is at an all-time high. According to the city's Campaign Finance Board, between 1989 and 2009 spending on City Council elections increased from \$2.9 million to \$24 million; for comptroller races it rose from \$4 million to \$19 million; and with billionaire Michael Bloomberg entering politics, spending for the mayoralty leapt from \$24 million to \$118 million.



Mayor Lindsay carrying his budget, April 1966

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

If John Lindsay was a voice for the beleaguered American city of the 1960s, Michael Bloomberg, who stresses economic development and runs the government as if it were a private business, is a symbol of the more prosperous city of today. For every city like New York, Chicago or Los Angeles that managed to dodge the bullet of financial catastrophe, there is a Buffalo, Detroit or Oakland staggered by decline. These struggling cities have no spokesperson.

Cities were once a significant part of the national discourse. In 1965 President Johnson created the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and in early 1966 he appointed Robert Weaver, the first African-American to hold a cabinet post, as its secretary. The appointment symbolized the nation's commitment to cities and their inhabitants. In 2009 President Obama created the White House Office of Urban Affairs. Within a year, its first director left his job to go to the New York regional office of HUD. At present Urban Affairs has no director. There is no comprehensive urban agenda at a time when the infrastructure of cities is eroding, schools are failing and poverty is rampant.

President Obama's most recent jobs proposal, though weak compared with the powerful legislation LBJ pushed through Congress in the name of equality, would have brought some relief to the unemployed and asked the wealthy to pay a larger share of the costs. Yet Republicans and some Democrats immediately declared the plan dead on arrival. In a process where campaign spending is up and voting turnout is down, it is easier to pay lip service to the poor and pretend that we can balance the budget without seriously asking more from the people who can spare it.

Those of us familiar with the history of New York City know better. We know that greed cannot fuel a fair economy. We know that a good society collectively takes care of its most vulnerable. We know that real democracy thrives on popular participation. That's the way it was before 1975, when New York's social compact began to crumble. Unfortunately, there is no John Lindsay to remind us. ■