

The Reformer by Dan Jacoby

It is generally true that political machines never anoint a reformer. Every so often, someone with that label is pushed to the top, usually as a result of a huge corruption scandal that decimates the ruling elite. Unfortunately, “reformers” elected as a result of scandal are usually not ready to take the reins, and the result is a patchwork of sorry attempts at reform that fail to accomplish their goals.

Since it is almost unheard of for a true reformer to be appointed by the political machine, self-appointed pundits were right to be cynical when “reformer” Christine Quinn emerged from the latest round of political infighting as the Speaker of the New York City Council.

The record so far seems to indicate that this particular reformer is different from all others. She began by replacing much of the City Hall staff, which is not all that unusual. But it was just the beginning. She then changed several rules for adding individual items to the budget, specific expenses known as “earmarks” or “member items” that, while theoretically benefiting some local organization, are generally there to benefit the elected official who supplies the money. The new rules imposed strict limits on these items, both in their number and in the way they get into the budget.

Next up – lobbying reform. Under the new rules, lobbyists cannot give gifts to public servants, and any contributions made by lobbyists are no longer eligible for matching funds under the city’s campaign finance system. Considering that these reforms were most likely lobbied against, and lobbied hard, by ... well, by lobbyists, of course ... they are even more remarkable. The reforms are not perfect; for instance, a lobbyist can still collect campaign contributions from other people, a process known as “bundling”, and those contributions can still be eligible for matching funds. But they are a large step in the right direction.

It’s an excellent start, but Speaker Quinn’s term has not yet completed one year, and there are three more years to come. There are also plenty of reforms yet to be addressed, much less enacted. And, of course, this essay has some suggestions.

Pass Resolution 131. This resolution urges adoption of a precinct-based paper ballot and optical scan (PBOS) voting system over the expensive, unreliable and opaque computer systems (DREs, for “Direct Recording Electronic” – like the Diebold systems used in Ohio) that the vendors are pushing so hard. The City Council has already unanimously passed a resolution calling for rigorous, public testing of all voting systems under consideration; this resolution, with 37 sponsors, is the logical next step. A PBOS system would save the city at least \$50-100 million up front, and tens of millions of dollars per year afterward. PBOS is also more reliable, lasts longer, requires less outside help to set up and maintain, and the reported result is more easily verified.

Pass Intro 53. This is known as the “Charge or Release” bill, and would codify a 1991 Court of Appeals ruling that is regularly ignored by New York City law enforcement. Under the ruling, anyone arrested for a crime can only be held for 24 hours before getting an arraignment. Every day, 250 people in New York City are held in jail cells, incommunicado, for longer, sometimes for two or three days. These people are often arrested for minor violations such as turnstile jumping, and if convicted would get no jail time at all. The city has already provided millions of extra dollars for law enforcement to catch up; the time has come to stop denying New Yorkers our rights.

Pass Intro 119. This bill, with 36 sponsors, would require co-op boards to submit, in writing, any reasons for denying an application. In the overwhelming majority of cases, the reason is simple – the applicant couldn't demonstrate the financial resources to meet obligations. Often, the reason is that the applicant simply didn't get along with the board. Occasionally, however, the true reason is something less legitimate – bigotry, in one form or another. At first glance, this bill seems fairly weak, but it can result in much of that bigotry coming to light, or in co-op boards giving in to inevitable changes.

Enact "Clean Money, Clean Elections" (CMCE). This is a new paradigm in campaign finance. It would replace the current matching funds system with full public funding for candidates who qualify by demonstrating sufficient constituent support. It is already in place in Maine and Arizona, and will take effect in Connecticut with the 2008 election cycle. CMCE has proven to get more people involved, especially women and minorities who generally have less access to the large sums of money currently required to run for office. It is also de facto lobbying reform, since there is almost no fundraising for lobbyists to use to get their feet in the door.

Our education system needs another overhaul. The provision giving the mayor control over education ends in 2009, and we should start restoring power to parents and teachers. Then we must – not should, but absolutely must – get rid of as many high-stakes, standardized tests as possible. These tests don't measure anything useful, and they waste huge blocks of time as teachers give practice test after practice test instead of actually teaching their students. Notice that these reforms don't require the billions of dollars that New York City is being shortchanged by the state; we can enact them on our own without having to wait for the state government – or the court – to come through.

There are many other issues that the City Council will face over the next three years (did someone say, "term limits"?). But if Speaker Quinn merely gets these five reforms done over the next three years, she will leave a tremendous legacy, and a frighteningly high bar for her successor to have to clear.