

By BRIAN ACKLEY
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The tea leaf readers are having great fun already at the expense of the recently appointed Buffalo Fiscal Control Board.

But that's okay, let 'em. Union bosses are apoplectic, city leaders are already down to their cuticles, having no fingernails left on which they can chew, and Democrats are quite sure the group represents some right wing conspiracy that is all about the betterment of Joel Giambra, not Buffalo. Of course, open mindedness has always been as noticeable in this region as our stunningly developed waterfront.

Yet, even some critics have bowed to the idea that individually, the credentials of this group are pretty darn impressive.

Kind of like, at least in some key ways, another nine-member group that has been front and center in national news circles lately. No, the Buffalo Fiscal Control Board is hardly the U.S. Supreme Court, but there are unmistakable parallels that might be insightful as to where this journey ends.

Many of the aforementioned groups -- labor, Democrats, gays and lesbians -- were sure the Apocalypse was upon us when such an uber-conservative like Sandra Day O'Connor was appointed to the court. Amazing, then, that just last month words like "rupture" and "crushing defeat" were used by right-wingers everywhere when the nine-member panel unfurled liberal interpretations in granting sweeping and historic rulings endorsing racial preferences and constitutional protection for homosexuals. What happened? Simple, the collective no longer represented an amalgam of pre-ordained individual views. In essence, the court, or more specifically the persons on it, evolved.

All those predictions of a narrowly defined, GOP-loving court were blown to smithereens. And it's because each individual was able and willing to take a fresh look, to make a tough choice in the face of conventional thinking, to do what they perceived, ultimately, as the right, legal and moral thing.

It is exactly what the Buffalo Financial Control Board must do. Thomas Baker is an inspired choice to lead the group. To some, it might seem Baker plays the role of Santa Claus all year long as head of Buffalo Niagara's most influential and prestigious philanthropic organization. But in reality, for every one present he delivers under someone's tree, there are twenty other equally as deserving would-be recipients who get nothing but coal. In other words, he's good at saying no, no matter how much it hurts.

While it's slightly unsettling to see Tony Masiello and Joel Giambra on the board -- this ought to be fertile territory for that pair to continue to fuel their festering feud which seems to be growing ever closer to an all out public dress down -- the group as a whole quite emphatically looks better than some of the individual parts.

There will be no black robes, but just like Supreme Court justices, each member of the control board has a paper trail that seemingly makes it easy to forecast just what they will do. But trying to pigeon hole them as a group make for interesting but not necessarily meaningful rhetoric and conjecture. It is simply unfair and unwise. Individually, each has strengths and philosophies that pass almost anyone's muster. To assume advanced agendas of union busting, sharing the county sales, or government mergers is to plunge blindly into uncharted territory. At the very least, this group deserves the chance to grow and lead in directions that are both tough and fair.

Yes, the water is murky when looking at the tea leaves. Just remember, it's not for a second about where each individual starts. It's all about where they collectively finish that matters.

(Brian Ackley is a columnist for the Weekly Independent Newspapers (WIN) of Western New York. WIN is a consortium of 19 community newspapers in Erie and Niagara counties with a paid weekly circulation of 75,000 homes, providing collaborative advertising and editorial support for member publications. For more information on WIN, or to provide feedback on this column, visit our website at www.wnynewspapers.com. Opinions expressed here are those of the author.)