

The Problem of Power; Is Anybody Listening?

By BRIAN ACKLEY
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Surely Robert Kennedy didn't have Buffalo specifically in mind.

But almost 40 years ago, he put in perfect perspective the plight of Buffalo Niagara today. "The problem of power is how to achieve its responsible use rather than its irresponsible and indulgent use - of how to get men of power to live for the public rather than off the public."

Sometimes, the most prescient voice is that from the outside. That's one of the problems in these parts - kind of the same dilemma parents face with most teenagers - often times we hear, but we don't listen.

Consider a June 9 story in New York's *Newsday*. Headlined "Beaten Down in Buffalo". Author Ann Givens succinctly and correctly categorizes most of what ill us. "What is harder to grasp is why," she writes, "while other Rust Belt cities like Pittsburgh and Cleveland have developed high tech technology and other industries to adapt to the modern economy, Buffalo has been incurably depressed."

She adds, "The overarching problem, community leaders say, is that the leadership in Buffalo is resistant to change. They say the same dozen people from local government and the business community have been sitting around for years trying to find new solutions to the same old problems."

Outsiders, you see, aren't encumbered by political baggage, parochial deals aimed at protection rather than progress, or the tangle of taxes and red tape that have stymied meaningful growth for decades. Outsiders don't have to look through the prism of desperation, mismanagement and incompetence.

Perhaps the clearest example came months ago, when a "financial recovery board" was as far off in the distance as the Sabres parading down Delaware Avenue with the Stanley Cup.

Gerald Hoetmer, executive director of the national Public Entity Risk Institute, a man who has closely studied more than three dozen municipal fire departments, took one look at Buffalo and concluded, "something is wrong, You're way off."

He went on to point out that while Buffalo has more than 2.6 firefighters per 1,000 city residents, the national average is about 1.3. He didn't come in swinging fire axes, screaming like a fire siren for job slashes and equipment reductions. In fact, he lobbied to add manpower to areas like fire prevention. Hooter's Polaroid analysis relied on simple facts, the idea that it can be done better, more efficiently, like in virtually every other municipality in the U.S.

Buffalo's response? "He doesn't have a clue what we do," said a union leader. "We've been fighting fires for over 100 years and we do it very well." Or this gem of a justification, "We have a very old housing stock."

Still, as human nature bubbles to the surface, we remain blindly optimistic, now pinning our hopes on a board of nine "outsiders" who will hear plenty in the coming months and years. It doesn't have to be as unpleasant as it may seem, if they will also listen.

As one local resident interviewed by *Newsday* put it, everyone who wanted to leave the city has left. Those that remain are the "diehards" Observed Givens: "With all Buffalo's problems, the people who live there love it fiercely."

"Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak," Winston Churchill often noted. "Courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen."

Courage has been sadly lacking for years in Western New York. We're all hearing. But it still may not be too late to start listening.

(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 its website at www.wnynewspapers.com. Opinions expressed here are those of the author.)