

Democracy is a funny thing.

About it, Margaret Thatcher once mused, "There is little hope for democracy if the hearts of men and women in democratic societies cannot be touched by a call to something greater than themselves."

The surprising defeat of political lifer Charles Swanick brought the former Prime Minister's words to life recently. It's funny, because every once in a while, people suddenly remember that the power lies with them. We already have term limits in this country, they're called elections.

It's hard to always know what the trigger will be. Whether it's energy manipulation and lies in California, or filthy, seamy, transparent power grabs in Western New York, there's a line to be crossed, even with an electorate that is easily taken for granted.

Take heed, Joel Giambra. Our County should be praying daily to the Governor's mansion in Albany that local Democrats rolled out Dan Ward – can anyone confirm that he's actually still running? – as his November challenger. It may be a little early to look at a 2007 election, but it says here his upcoming third term is the last one he will serve as County Executive, whether he wants it to be or not.

Politicians have shelf lives, some the length of fresh ground beef, others of canned Spam. Singular events -- like the smarmy Swanick Shuffle -- can accelerate the process, to be sure. But Giambra, if he's even interested in serving beyond then, should notice the events of September 9 past.

Anyone remember the Horizon's Waterfront Commission? Dennis Gorski does. It was a glitzy blueprint designed to replace smokestacks, rusting ships and dead fish with parks, stores and bike paths. A decade later, voters looked around and collectively sighed with apologies to songstress Peggy Lee, "Is that all there is?" They saw smokestacks, rusting ships and dead fish.

Giambra is traveling a similarly perilous track, hitching his biggest wagon to regionalism. It's a chic position, and probably the right one, too. But try as he might, there are too many obstacles in his way to bring down the plethora of power-driven fiefdoms which have all but sucked the well dry. It's become clear Buffalo is going kicking and screaming. Four years from now, people will look around and see fiefdoms.

Cry not for Swanick. So knocked down is he in defeat, that by lunch time two days after his primary, he was leading a long conga line of GOP'ers out of a popular downtown eatery. (Yes, they were meeting in a backroom, but at least thanks to New York, it was smoke free.) As sure as the cheese was bubbly on the spaghetti parm, they had already cooked up not only Plan B, but plans C through Z as well, undoubtedly making sure that Swanick's parachute is not only golden but glory-filled as well. Heck, if he's in an "in your face" kind of mood, he's stil on the November ballot, just on lesser party lines, so maybe this isn't his Swanick song after all.

Party leaders can scratch all the heads they can find looking for answers. After Swanick's defeat, words like stunned and shocked were tossed about as easily as leaves on a breezy September day. Maybe it's too easy to figure out. Those thoughts come easily when voters are viewed and valued simply as appendages of Bob Davis or Len Lenihan or Tony Masiello or Joel Giambra, even though for so long they've been so good at acting like ones.

Democracy is a funny thing, all right. Especially when voters finally remember they always get the last laugh.

*(Brian Ackley is a columnist for the Weekly Independent Newspapers (WIN) of Western New York. WIN is a consortium of 19 community weekly newspapers in Erie and Niagara counties with a combined paid 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](http://www.wnynewspapers.com). Opinions expressed here are those of the author.)*