NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

DAILY NEWS, THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2001

City needs to rethink term limits

By ROB COX

LONDON — People here are flummoxed as to why we New Yorkers want to replace Mayor Giuliani and two-thirds of the City Council in the city's time of greatest need. That's like kicking out Winston Churchill in the thick of the blitz.

As a transplanted New Yorker, I explain to my British hosts that 59% of the city electorate decided in 1993 that none of the city's elected leaders should stand for more than two terms.

The reason? Well, it seemed like a good idea at the time — and in a subsequent referendum three years later — as a means of keeping the political system in check. When I voted in 1993, I remember thinking this was just what the city needed to assure fresh leadership blood.

Now, I must admit, I have misgivings. Would a referendum revisiting term limits still find majority support?

Term limits do have their uses. Arguably, such legislation might have spared the city some of the corruption it experienced during the years dominated by Tammany Hall in the 19th and early 20th centuries. But it would also have kept Fiorello LaGuardia from running for his third term, which spanned World War II. The Little Flower's experience and moral support buoyed the city's spirits during some of its darkest days. Nobody argues in retrospect that a neophyte would have done a better job.

The will of the people in a free and fair election is a stronger force for good governance than arbitrary limits set on an elected official's length of service.

It goes without saying that Giuliani has shown exceptional leadership, compassion and grace under pressure in the aftermath of the World Trade Center tragedy. His capacity to lead has not been lost on those outside New York. One London tabloid published a photograph of the mayor, his arm draped over an exhausted rescue worker's shoulders and his face etched with emotion, alongside a snapshot of President Bush looking stiff and overwhelmed amid the rubble of the twin towers. "Who is the real President?" asked the headline.

In the current circumstances, New Yorkers would almost certainly reelect Giuliani, given the chance.

With the challenges to leadership in New York made abundantly clear, we will look afresh at the candidates lining up to take over where Giuliani leaves off. Do we need a liberal public advocate to broaden civil liberties in a city now under siege? What of the billionaire candidate? Insensitive remarks about the dangers that firefighters and sanitation workers face take on a new meaning as more than 300 of our city's Bravest lie under the remains of the World Trade Center.

The terrifying circumstances our city faces require exceptional measures. Replacing the leadership of the city when it most needs the experience and resolve that the mayor and the Council have demonstrated is not only risky, but may be against New Yorkers' interests. An emergency referendum on term limits would resolve this issue once and for all.

Cox, deputy editor of Breakingviews.com, a British-based commentary service, lived in New York for a decade before moving to England.

CITY_21MC100_011829688

NYC-WTC_000412372