

A Reversal of Fortune

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It seems only yesterday when we were celebrating what seemed to be a paradigm shift for America and New York City and State. Barack Obama had become president, David Paterson had almost unbelievably become New York State's first African-American governor, and Charlie Rangel had become the highest ranking and most powerful congressman in the nation's history as head of the House Ways and Means Committee.

In those heady days, I -- along with many others -- thought we were on the eve of tremendous progress on a whole host of economic and social issues that we had been working on for decades. Suddenly everything seemed possible. Now, admittedly, I tend to go overboard as to what I believe to be possible. I gave up my childhood imaginary companion only when I was eight, and I struggled with letting go of my attachment to the Easter Bunny -- but I certainly wasn't alone in my hopes for progressive change.

Fast forward to this morning and to say that our hopes for significant change for the working poor of New York are in ruins. The leaders who were to implement the change are in full retreat. President Obama without strong support from his own party is in retreat on a large part of his agenda. I won't even discuss the train wreck around David Paterson's term in office, and this morning Congressman Rangel announced that he is taking a leave from his post as Chair of Ways and Means.

Rather than focusing on the individual struggles of each, I am more concerned with the constituencies whose well-being depends in large measure on their clout in office. In David Paterson's case, he was never able to lay out a program to help people of color or the working poor despite a solid progressive record in the State Senate. But the president's and Rangel's loss of power ahead of us is an enormous challenge to New York City, particularly in the Great Recession.

In today's [New York Times](#), Sam Roberts reports the release by the city of numbers indicating that, unlike earlier Census reports, when adjusted for the cost of living, poverty rose significantly between 2006 and 2008. Every indicator is that when the numbers come in from the period covered by the recession, poverty in New York City will be up significantly. Of course, this is occurring just at a time when the political muscle represented by Obama, Paterson, and Rangel is at its lowest ebb.

So to quote from an old *Herald Tribune* cartoon concerning the Tweed Ring's domination of New York City politics, "What are we going to do about it?" Plainly, while New York's working poor have lost a lot of political clout, this state and their issues remain important. Holding the remaining political leadership accountable to what still amounts to the bedrock of the Democratic Party is vital. Chuck Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand have to be questioned continually about what they intend to do about jobless numbers in the black and Latino communities - numbers that are approaching those during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Similarly, the likely Democratic standard bearer in the upcoming gubernatorial race, Andrew Cuomo, has to be pushed to come up with a platform that addresses the needs of this constituency and not be allowed to have a free ride based on how inept his predecessor has been in these past several months. And, finally, in Mayor Bloomberg's last term, his administration has to show the same kind of intensity he showed around restricting gun sales and calorie counting. For a third of New Yorkers living at or below poverty, his voice could make this more than just the cries of the bleeding hearts.

Despite the defeats, this fight can't be considered over yet.