

Contentious Candidates Assure Lively Contest

By RICHARD STEIER | Posted: Monday, September 16, 2013 5:30 pm

Although tens of thousands of paper ballots were still to be counted as this newspaper went to press Sept. 16, City Comptroller William C. Thompson's concession that morning assured that Public Advocate Bill de Blasio would gain the Democratic nomination for Mayor, setting the stage for a clash of polar opposites with the Republican nominee, former Deputy Mayor and Metropolitan Transportation Authority CEO Joseph J. Lhota.

Mr. Lhota had no sooner gained the GOP nomination late on primary night Sept. 10 than he moved to full battle mode in his victory speech, deriding Mr. de Blasio's "Tale of Two Cities" campaign theme as "nothing more than class warfare; an attempt to divide the city." He continued that assault in subsequent days during radio and TV interviews, telling WNYW-TV's "Good Morning America" that Mr. de Blasio's "approach to things is to tear things down and build them up in the image he wants, which I think is a failed image."

Final Tally Now Moot

The Public Advocate rose from mid-pack seven weeks before the primary to rest on the cusp of a nomination that it had been almost universally expected would be decided in a runoff and with candidates other than him involved. He did it through slashing attacks on Mayor Bloomberg's policies and the candidate he insisted would perpetuate them, City Council Speaker Christine Quinn, but he was less aggressive in his initial response to Mr. Lhota.

That posture appeared largely attributable to the uncertainty then about whether he would be able to claim the Democratic nomination outright or would have to face the distant runner-up in the primary, former City Comptroller William C. Thompson Jr.—in a runoff on Oct. 1.

Pressure on Thompson

By the time absentee ballots began to be tallied Sept. 13, Mr. de Blasio had 40.3 percent of the vote, about 2,100 votes above the 40-percent threshold needed to avoid a runoff. Mr. Thompson was under intense pressure from fellow Democrats, including some union leaders, to concede, but insisted that he would await the counting of the 78,000 outstanding ballots to see whether in fact he could take part in a runoff.

By Monday morning, however, the growing pressure coupled with the mathematical realities he was bucking led Mr. Thompson to bow out of the race during a City Hall press conference in which Governor Cuomo joined top city Democrats led by Mr. de Blasio in a show of unity.

"Bill de Blasio and I want to move our city forward in same direction," Mr. Thompson told

reporters. “This is bigger than either one of us.”

Even if Mr. Thompson had qualified for a runoff, the odds seemed overwhelmingly against him being able to defeat Mr. de Blasio, and grew greater in the 36 hours after Mr. de Blasio gave what amounted to a victory speech that began just before midnight last Tuesday.

One Thompson supporter, former Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer, finished first in the 2001 Democratic primary and then lost in a runoff with then-Public Advocate Mark Green, but his margin of 4 points in the initial vote was 10 points below the de Blasio/Thompson spread. Four years later, Mr. Ferrer was teetering on the 40 percent threshold and the runner-up, then-U.S. Rep. Anthony Weiner, announced he would not compete in a runoff even before it was determined that Mr. Ferrer had enough votes in the final tally to avoid one.

Mr. Ferrer said the morning after the primary that there was no obligation that Mr. Thompson be magnanimous. “The law says either you get 40 or you don’t,” he noted. “I got 40.”

Asked whether it was really be possible for Mr. Thompson to prevail in a runoff, given not only the margin but the fact that Mr. de Blasio had either won or tied among every demographic group, including Mr. Thompson’s base among black voters, Mr. Ferrer replied, “Anything is possible. Is it likely? I’d rather be de Blasio than Thompson.”

From Slim to None

A union official who was backing Mr. Thompson was more specific about just how much the odds were against his candidate, particularly given the greater enthusiasm Mr. de Blasio had been able to generate among his followers. Speaking conditioned on anonymity, he noted there are generally lighter turnouts for runoffs than for primaries and said, “You’re going to have a 25-percent drop-off in the next election. And whose supporters are the most dedicated?”

Mr. Thompson benefitted from having the endorsements of most municipal unions, principal among them the United Federation of Teachers, Transport Workers Union Local 100, and Teamsters Local 237. He also had virtually all the city’s uniformed unions aside from the Patrolmen’s Benevolent Association, which stayed neutral, the Correction Officers Benevolent Association, which backed City Comptroller John C. Liu, and the Uniformed Fire Officers Association, which supported Ms. Quinn.

It wasn’t nearly enough. Mr. de Blasio was light on public-employee endorsements, with his most-notable backer being the union representing faculty at the City University of New York, the Professional Staff Congress, but he more than compensated with the backing of Local 1199 of the Service Employees International Union, which has only about 4,000 municipal members but totals more than 100,000 in the private sector and has a vaunted get-out-the-vote operation.

Just Didn't Add Up

To make up the 14-point deficit in a runoff, Mr. Thompson would have had to hold his own supporters and picked up close to three out of every four votes that went to the candidates who were eliminated after the primary tallies. The chances of doing so went from unlikely to virtually impossible when three major labor groups that backed Ms. Quinn—Building Service Workers Local 32BJ of the SEIU, the Hotel Trades Council, and the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Workers Union—

joined the Council Speaker in endorsing Mr. de Blasio Sept. 12. He also picked up the backing of Communications Workers of America Local 1180 and Local 372 of DC 37, which had endorsed Mr. Liu in the primary.

The Lhota/De Blasio race will provide a match-up of two outspoken men whose ideological differences are reflected in their entries into city government in the early 1990s. Mr. de Blasio served as an aide to Mayor David Dinkins, while Mr. Lhota left the world of investment banking to become a top financial aide to Mayor Rudy Giuliani and eventually rose to become his Deputy Mayor for Operations.

Mr. Lhota has said that he will make his case to voters in an electorate where there are six times as many registered Democrats as Republicans by emphasizing his executive experience in that administration and during the year he headed the MTA before resigning to launch his first run for office. Mr. de Blasio after serving in the Dinkins administration worked for two more-moderate Democrats, serving in the the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development during President Bill Clinton's administration, where his immediate boss was Housing Secretary Andrew Cuomo.

Mr. de Blasio, aided greatly by Mr. Weiner's implosion in late July after it was revealed that he had carried on sexting relationships with several women more than a year after his 2011 resignation from Congress for similar dalliances, soared to the front of the Democratic pack by assailing the Bloomberg administration's conduct of the stop-and-frisk program and pledging to raise taxes on the wealthy to pay for expanded all-day kindergarten and after-school programs.

About That Tax...

That tax, which would have to be approved in Albany, is expected to have a tough road in Albany, where all office-holders are up for re-election next year. Mr. Cuomo did nothing to offer encouragement Sept. 12 when he said, "Campaign plans often come down to bumper stickers. And I'll be curious to find out exactly what the real plans are, and once we have a real discussion, then I'll have an opinion."

It was that proposed tax and the rhetoric Mr. de Blasio has attached to it that Mr. Lhota was alluding to when he accused his likely general-election rival of class warfare. He has also staunchly defended the stop-and-frisk program, saying that the administration's main failing has been not in its execution but in failing to explain it properly to the public. After U.S. District Judge Shira Scheindlin in mid-August ruled that the NYPD had violated the Constitution in its conduct of the program, Mr. Lhota urged Mayor Bloomberg to not only appeal her decision but also to ask that any of its remedies be put on hold pending the outcome of that appeal.

Mr. de Blasio during the campaign repeatedly stated that he would dismiss Raymond W. Kelly as Police Commissioner if he was elected and blistered Ms. Quinn for pledging to retain him if she won. Mr. Lhota, in contrast, has defended and praised the Police Commissioner. Interestingly, his old boss, Mr. Giuliani—who has endorsed him and helped line up other endorsements and campaign donors for him—opted not to keep Mr. Kelly, who had been Mr. Dinkins's second Police Commissioner, when he took office in 1994, opting as most Mayors do to pick his own person—in that case, William J. Bratton.

Uniformed Union Trouble

Mr. Lhota, the son of a cop whose grandfather was a firefighter, would normally be expected to line up endorsements from all of the city's police unions, given their unhappiness with Mr. de Blasio's rhetoric on stop-and-frisk. He complicated the situation, however, by referring to the Port Authority Police in May as "mall cops." Several police union leaders said that disrespect shown toward a force which lost 37 officers on 9/11 made it untenable for them to endorse Mr. Lhota. It is likely, however, that even if he doesn't get their endorsements in the general election, he will be the choice of most cops.

Among the rest of the city's unions, the overwhelming majority figure to line up behind Mr. de Blasio, based not only on their political leanings but because Mr. Lhota has flatly ruled out granting retroactive raises. Mr. de Blasio himself was more-reserved than some fellow Democrats on this issue during the primary campaign, saying during their final debate that before granting what is expected to be as much as \$5.4 billion in back pay he would tell the unions to "show me the cost savings."