



CAMBRIDGE CITY COUNCIL

CITY HALL, CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS 02139

(617) 498-9094

David E. Sullivan
City Councillor

March 21, 1984

To the Honorable, the City Council:

I thought my colleagues would appreciate the attached item from page 37 of the March 19 New Yorker. I am reliably informed that it was penned by none other than Bill McKibben, currently of that magazine's staff and formerly of the Harvard Crimson.

I think Mr. McKibben makes an excellent point or two, as usual.

Sincerely,

David E. Sullivan



THE TALK OF THE TOWN

Notes and Comment

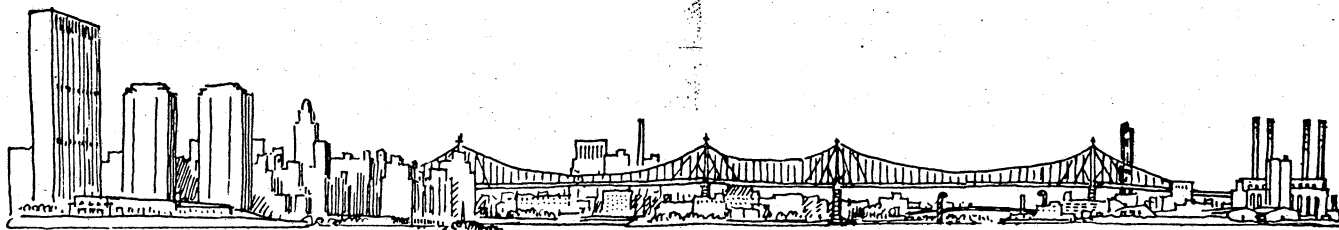
A FRIEND writes:
Cambridge, Massachusetts, where I learned what I know about politics by watching the City Council, holds an election every second year, amid all the sign-posting, sign-defacing, coalition-forming, independence-declaring, sidewalk-repairing, wake-attending, and general confetti-throwing common to such affairs. Elections, after all, are what politicians really enjoy, and in return they agree to serve the intervening terms. But, along with the shouting, the Cambridge elections offer a good deal of meat; they are worth voting in, because the candidates, once they've been elected, behave predictably on specific issues that matter. The city's most divisive issue for the last decade has been rent control. Some politicians are for it and some are against it, and since they say so in advance one knows whom to vote for, usually depending on whether one pays rent or collects it. Rarely do councillors reverse their positions once they're elected; when they do, they are ousted at the next vote. The upshot is, in fact, democracy—messy, coercive, sometimes bitter, and remarkably representative. Occasionally, though, a new candidate declares at the start of his campaign that he is sick of the “polarization” and the “confrontation” and the “rancor,” and that he thinks a “new spirit

of compromise” is in order, or, better yet, some new plan that will allow tenants to pay low rents and landlords to collect high rents. Cantabrigians, for the most part, are too savvy for such tactics, and the political zebras rarely win, though they often excite much comment, particularly among those who are neither tenants nor landlords.

The nation's political imagination seems to have been captured in recent weeks by the notion that there are “new ideas,” and an as yet unspecified “politics of the future,” vastly preferable to the musty politics of the past. This claim has intuitive appeal, for, after all, the antibiotic was a great improvement on the leech. But, though they may be quibbles, a couple of questions come to mind. First, what is meant by “ideas”? Strong, daring concepts, like “turn the other cheek,” or “unalienable rights” that include “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” or “I have a dream” (or, for that matter, “the master race,” or “the dictatorship of the proletariat”)? Or, as seems more likely, given the history of American elections, are “new ideas” ones that start from the premise that our problems need little fixes, that the TV program is fine but the vertical-hold knob ought to be given a little twist? And then what if, like the idea that inspired the man who simultaneously smoked a pack of cigarettes and whistled “Dixie,” “new

ideas” have “newness” as their only virtue? Sometimes the benefits of evolution are debatable: Was color TV a better idea than black-and-white, and was that superior to radio, and was radio more fun than sitting around and talking, and how did they all compare to paddling about in the primordial soup? And sometimes progress is clearly regress: The cross-bow may not have been a great idea, but the ICBM was infinitely worse. And, of course, there are a million ideas that no one has bothered to hatch, because they are stupid or silly: Should soldiers salute with the other hand? What about tax credits for eating Italian food and slugging down Chianti? A man who wore a red-white-and-blue top hat and drove a red-white-and-blue school bus once solicited my vote on the ground that, by a calculus of his own devising, the letters in the word “love” added up to sixteen, or fifty-four, or some such.

The point is obvious; still, the notion that somewhere there exists a set of new ideas is bewitching—at least, until the new ideas are announced. The reason, I think, is that an awful lot of us wish politics were less messy, less divisive, than they are. Take just one issue as an example: This country and this world include huge numbers of poor people. What is to be done about them? One idea is that everyone should give up some of



Richard Edes Harrison

his or her wealth. Another idea—Reagan's idea, though he shouldn't be blamed for its creation—is that nothing should be done (except, perhaps, hope that a rising tide will float millions of sunken ships). A few people support the first idea, and more back the second, but most of us are somewhere in the middle. We don't, for a combination of ethical and aesthetic reasons, believe in letting the poor starve in the streets, but we don't much like the idea of the welfare system, in part because it doesn't work very well but mostly because it costs a hell of a lot in taxes and we want, you know, a videocassette recorder. Now, if someone has a new idea about how to make the welfare system more efficient, that is fine. And if someone has a new idea about sharing the wealth, that is fine, too (though not likely to win many votes). But if someone just has "new ideas" and "politics of the future" and contempt for the past, such a platform suggests to the ambivalent in us that perhaps we can avoid the choices between, in this instance, rich and poor—perhaps they will be able to eat cake, and we will be able to eat cake, and *everyone* will be able to eat cake, and have it, too. Alchemy would be dandy, but in the meantime democracy is nothing

less and nothing more than real and tough choices, one after another.

S-185

Comm. from C.D. Sullivan, transmitting a copy of an item from the March 19, 1984 issue of the New Yorker written by Bill McKibben, formerly of the Harvard Crimson.

In City Council,

March 26, 1984

- 3/26/1984 -

Placed on File