



"Liberated to Tell the Truth"

George De Stefano (March 14, 2013)



Brooklyn's Sal Albanese returns to politics after 15 years - as a candidate for Mayor

When Sal F. Albanese announced in January 2013 that he would seek the Democratic nomination for Mayor of New York, three questions came to mind:

Where's he been?

Why now?



and,

Who?

To answer them all: Albanese is a former New York City Council member from Brooklyn who left politics in 1998 to work in the private sector, in financial services. He's returning because he believes he's more qualified - and more independent and progressive -- than the other announced Democrats, including the current leader in the polls, City Council Speaker Christine Quinn.

The Italian-born Albanese - his family moved to Brooklyn from Calabria in 1958, when he was eight years old - established a reputation for independence while a City Council member representing his south Brooklyn district, which comprised Bensonhurst, Bay Ridge, Dyker Heights and Sunset Park. Albanese won reelection four times and represented the 43rd District until 1997, when he first became a mayoral candidate.

During a recent interview at a diner on Fifth Avenue in Bay Ridge, Albanese explained why he was running and discussed his campaign's themes and ideas.

"I spent 15 years as a City Council member with an unblemished record of independence. Even people who don't like me will tell you I was independent," he says. "I was one of few Council members who didn't have extra money. I didn't take lulus [the extra funds the Speaker doles out to members as a reward for their loyalty] or stipends, because if you take that money you lose your independence."

He says that the other Democratic candidates for mayor - Quinn, City Comptroller John Liu, former City Comptroller Bill Thompson and Public Advocate Bill de Blasio - "are career politicians indebted to lobbyists and special interest groups." Quinn, he notes, has taken large campaign contributions from Coca Cola because the company wants to overturn Mayor Michael Bloomberg's ban on sales of large sodas, which Albanese supports. De Blasio calls himself "the outer borough candidate," but Albanese says his rival "has huge amounts of money from the Yellow Cab industry, which opposes the expansion of cabs to the outer boroughs."

"We can say things nobody else can say because we're not indebted. We're going to be liberated to tell the truth and have creative ideas, and I think that's going to resonate with New Yorkers," he says.

Albanese plans to fund his campaign with small contributions made under the city's campaign finance law - legislation that he sponsored while in the City Council. Under the law, a candidate who raises \$250,000 in small contributions from city residents is eligible for a six to one match, or \$1.75 million. Albanese says with this amount, which is quite modest nowadays, he'll be able to get his message out. "We're running a very efficient and cost effective campaign," he notes. "My way is to raise money from New Yorkers who are interested in good government. If you get to City Hall indebted to every special interest in town, you can't run the city on the merits."



"Our challenge," he says, "is to raise the money to get my name out there. With the matching fund system I feel really good about the possibility of becoming competitive."

Living Wages, Better Schools and Fairer Mass Transit

Since announcing his candidacy in January, Albanese has put forth his campaign's ideas in public and media appearances and at his [website](#) [2] . His signature issues include economic development, mass transit and education.

He's passionate about creating "living wage" jobs that "don't pay people \$8 an hour." "You can't live in this city on that," he says. In 1996, Albanese, over the opposition of Mayor Rudy Giuliani, passed the first living wage bill in the city's history, which required some City contractors to pay higher minimum wages. "That bill put \$3 billion in the pockets of 70,000 workers, according to the Independent Budget Office," he says. "I want to use the city's contracting power to ensure that people are paid a decent wage."

He calls for a "faster, fairer and fully funded" mass transit system, noting that in the past five years, riders have seen their fares increase four times. "By 2015, when the next hike kicks in, riders will have been walloped with a 35% increase over just eight years," he says. "That is twice the rate of inflation and a slap in the face to working New Yorkers. If we stay on this course, we could be paying more than \$3 for a ride by 2021."

Albanese would expand the Select Bus Service by adding 20 more routes by 2018. He would restore bus services cut in 2010, which he says generated little savings for the MTA and came at "enormous costs to transit-starved neighborhoods."

But his boldest mass transit proposal is for what he calls "fair tolling" -- lowering tolls on certain bridges while adding them on others. He would "significantly lower" the \$15 toll Staten Islanders currently pay and add tolls to the 59th St and Brooklyn bridges. "The idea is to lower tolls on bridges where there are few other transit options and add them where there are a lot of transit options." This approach, he argues, would raise money for mass transit and to maintain bridges and roads.

"We've become the thought leaders on transit," he says, noting that at candidate forums held since he announced in January even his Democratic rivals have said they like his campaign's ideas.

Albanese, who has taught in New York's public school system, says he would work to "repair the relationship" between City Hall and the City's public school teachers "after years of demonization that have destroyed morale and negatively impacted an entire generation of students." He would introduce "a 21st century curriculum that puts New York City students at the forefront of technology, engineering, and computer science education while embracing the arts, music, and fitness programs as key components to a well-rounded education."



His administration also would establish “the city's first public pediatric wellness centers,” staffed by educators, psychologists and physicians who would “work with parents to ensure that every student enters school with an equal opportunity to learn.”

Immigration and Assimilation, Brooklyn-Style

When asked about the demographic changes in his district since he was in the City Council, Albanese noted that the Italian American community, and indeed the “white ethnic” population in general, has significantly decreased, replaced by new immigrants from Latin America, Asia and Eastern Europe.

Just then an elderly white woman who had been seated at a nearby booth approached Albanese. After apologizing for interrupting our interview, she told Albanese that “there oughta be a law that people who come here have to speak English.” She complained about local stores where “everything is in Spanish, not American” and that new immigrants receive many benefits that people like her cannot obtain. Albanese listened patiently, and then said, “the people who come here will eventually learn English.” She seemed dubious. “This has always been a country of immigrants,” he told her.

After she left, Albanese said that when he came to America, he couldn't speak any English. “I remember walking into Our Lady of Peace grammar school in south Brooklyn and not being able to tell the nun where I lived. It was embarrassing. It would've been nice if there'd been a little bit of bilingual education back then.”

“I actually assimilated pretty quickly but it wasn't an easy transition initially. I grew up in Park Slope when it was a working class neighborhood. I started playing baseball, and as a result of that picked up the Brooklyn accent from people I played ball with, and became like every other Italian American kid even though I was an immigrant.”

Albanese says he returns to Italy “every couple of years,” most recently to take his 85 year-old mother to visit her brother, who died shortly afterwards. Albanese was born in the Calabrian town of Mammola but his family later moved to Gioiosa Ionica. He returned for the first time in 1976, after having left in 1958.

He clearly recalls the experience of immigration, leaving Calabria with his grandfather. (His father had already made the trip and was living in Brooklyn.) “We had to take a ferry to Palermo to have a physical exam before coming to the U.S. You had to get a physical to get the green card. I came to America on an ocean liner called Cristoforo Colombo, and we landed on the west side of Manhattan.”

New York City, he says, “gave me and my family a lot.”



"We came from Italy when I was eight years of age, and the public schools, the sports programs, the libraries, they all were instrumental in helping my family reach the middle class. I want to do that for future generations. I looked around, I know all the people who are running and I believe I am the most qualified. That's why I decided to throw my hat in the ring."

When asked whether entering a crowded race, with little money and name recognition, was "quixotic," he says, "Politics to me is a vocation, it's not a job or a game, our political system has a direct impact on people's lives and if I thought it was quixotic I wouldn't be in it."

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