

Beating Back the Dersh: Local Power and Political Reality in Brooklyn and Beyond

Most bullies will back down when stared in the eye and threatened with a big enough stick. This shouldn't come as a surprise even when the bully in question is [Alan Dershowitz](#) leading the usual gang which materializes behind him when a college campus schedules an event to discuss some of the less attractive aspects of the policies of the State of Israel.

When this happened at Brooklyn College last week what came as a surprise was the man wielding the stick. This was no friend of the Palestinian people but rather the billionaire mayor Michael Bloomberg who, in a morning press conference suggested that Mr. Dershowitz and his followers take up residence in "North Korea . . . if they want universities where the government decides what kind of subjects are fit for discussion."

While it was gratifying to see Dershowitz forced into retreat it is important not to exaggerate Bloomberg's role. For the mayor merely delivered the coup de grace stepping on to a stage set by the real heros in this effort-the students and faculty of Brooklyn College who refused to raise the white flag when Dershowitz turned his artillery against them.

It would have been understandable had they done so. For lining up behind Dershowitz were not just the usual extremist Israel-firsters such as Dov Hikind but the cream of New York City's liberal left. The first salvo was [a letter](#) from upper west-side Congressman Jerrold Nadler signed by most of the New York City delegation including liberal stalwarts Yvette Clark and Nydia Valazquez. Next came [a letter](#) from New York City Council Assistant Majority Leader Lewis Fidler signed by ten council members which ominously included a direct threat to Brooklyn College's funding should the proposed event go forward.

But rather than being an easy target, some of those targeted by Dershowitz turned out to be experienced organizers and more than a little media savvy, deluging the twitter accounts of the officials, demanding answers from them and circulating via facebook [a petition](#) which quickly received over 2,500 signatures.

Within days those local officeholders concerned with maintaining their reputations among their liberal constituents withdrew their names from the Fidler letter clearing the way for Bloomberg and the Times to issue ringing endorsements of academic freedom.

And so what began as a potential fiasco ended as an inspiring lesson in grassroots organizing.

But that was not the the only lesson. While celebrating the outcome, it was easy to forget that what city council liberals were backing off from was, as the mayor pointed out, a neo-Stalinist attack on academic freedom. Hardly a radical or even a notably progressive position on their part. And this defense of basic decency and normal civil rights, required the mayor to take the first step forward.

Furthermore, no elected official had anything to say about the real issue which made the Brooklyn College panel on BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) necessary: the de facto ethnic cleansing campaign being waged by the State of Israel.

In fact, most of those jumping on the academic freedom bandwagon at Brooklyn College were quick to express their unconditional support for Israel and to denounce the BDS movement as tinged with anti-semitism.

As the support for the Brooklyn College BDS event and [as recent polls have showed](#), a likely majority of New York City residents have very different views on this matter: they deplore maintaining Gaza as the world's largest open air prison, the expansion of settlements, and reject unconditional support for the State of Israel.

So the question is reasonably asked why do New York City Council members represent the views of an increasingly marginal reactionary fringe rather than those of their own constituents.

The answer is because doing so only has an upside: the potential benefit of big money donations from right wing supporters of Israel when a move up the ranks to higher office is being contemplated or when a good word from them will help with a transition into lucrative positions in the private sector.

There is no downside since the left only becomes active in opposition to some particularly egregious capitulation. After the storm has passed, most will be willing to forgive and forget dutifully pulling the lever for the local Democrat coming up for office in the next election cycle.

The Brooklyn College/BDS controversy provides a good example of this dynamic with the response to City Council member Jumaane Williams providing a particularly revealing illustration. Williams, [whose letter](#) to Brooklyn College President Gould "supported the views that have been expressed by . . . Alan Dershowitz in this matter" remains unapologetic in his support for the Dershowitz agenda. But rather than seeing this as grounds to reconsider their

support of local office holder who willingly aligned with the far right, [activists tweets](#) have repeatedly expressed their respect for Williams despite their disappointment with him on this issue. What the circumstances would seem to merit, an electoral challenge to those council members who aligned with Dershowitz, has not been suggested anywhere, to my knowledge.

Activists need to learn to respond to politicians in the brute force language which they understand, the loss of their jobs. Their failure to issue a serious and credible threat when their core values are attacked sends an unmistakable message of its own- that the triangulation strategy which has succeeded brilliantly for neo-liberal Democrats for generations has worked again. More capitulations by Williams and others are sure to follow, not as dramatic as this, but in the form of the right wing drift signed off on by the Democratic Party on fiscal austerity, education "reform", indefinite detention etc.

The crisis at Brooklyn College has provided a useful lesson not only that the worst excesses of government officials can sometimes be combatted with grassroots mobilization but also that that is not enough. Real political change requires that the left invest itself in competing for and achieving state power on whatever level that can be obtained. This includes, as this instance showed, local political power.

Local elections should be recognized for what they are, available opportunities for activists who are seriously interested in advancing a left agenda while providing a check on the worst excesses of a Democratic Party all too willing to line up with the far right when it serves their interests and when they can get away with it.