



The Making of a Progressive Mayor: James Kenney of Philadelphia

Richardson Dilworth

Series: Progressive Mayors and Urban Social Movements

Philadelphia's voters elected James Kenney Mayor in 2015 after he had served more than two decades as an at-large member of the city council. Given Kenney's roots in relatively conservative South Philadelphia, there was little to suggest that he would become a progressive mayor. Yet his personal proclivities—and need for votes as an at-large councilmember—ultimately led him to construct an electoral coalition that combined Black, White working-class, and liberal groups.

Chris Christie is sitting on his very fat ass next to Jerry Jones in his box at the Linc. You suck!
Kissing Texas' ass for 2016! Awful!

— Jim Kenney on Twitter, December 14, 2014

“Meet the Progressive Likely to Become Philadelphia’s Next Mayor,” announced *HuffPost* soon after James F. Kenney (known universally as Jim Kenney) won the city’s Democratic mayoral primary on May 20, 2015 (Fang 2015). It was an easy prediction considering Philadelphia had only elected Democratic mayors since 1951 and registered Democrats outnumber Republicans by more than seven to one. Of the six Democrats who ran, Kenney—who won 56% of the primary votes and then went on to win the general with 85%—was certainly the most authentically progressive.

Kenney’s platform was similar to progressive mayoral candidates like Bill de Blasio in New York, Ed Murray in Seattle, and Betsy Hodges in Minneapolis. All these mayors have sought to address police abuse, discrimination, and economic inequality, reflected in their specific proposals for higher minimum wages, universal prekindergarten, affordable housing, greater police oversight, and ending stop-and-frisk.

This brief essay tracks the factors that pushed Jim Kenney toward being more progressive during his political career and reflects on where he may go in a second term (he will run for reelection in 2019). As the epigram to my essay suggests, Kenney expresses his prejudices and beliefs clearly and passionately (though his tweets became less entertaining when he started running for mayor). He is notorious for feuding with other politicians and ceremonial events often seem to bore him. And yet he is an experienced and deeply knowledgeable politician with a keen sense of his constituents and how they have changed in the nearly 30 years that he has held elected office.

Jim Kenney’s Philadelphia

Jim Kenney was born in South Philadelphia in 1958, when the first signs of the “urban crisis” were settling on the city, which lost 6,000 people every year in the 1950s and 1960s, accelerating to

26,000 every year during the 1970s, when Kenney was a teenager, even though the city's Black population increased, from 376,041 to 638,878, between 1950 and 1980. Racial tensions ran high during the period, when the notorious Frank Rizzo served as the city's mayor.

As a student at La Salle University in North Philadelphia, Kenny started working for Vincent Fumo, a young state senator from South Philadelphia who was first elected in 1978. Known for being a smart, "tough, partisan, sometimes brazen political infighter" (Meyers 1984), Fumo became the ranking Democrat on the Pennsylvania Senate Appropriations Committee in 1984 and held the position into the 2000s, enabling him to build an extensive political machine.

Kenney was Fumo's district chief of staff when he decided to run for an at-large city-council seat in 1991, receiving the most votes out of a field of 25 candidates (Dent 2015a). Of this victory, Kenny observed "it had nothing to do with me. It was all the political deals, getting the money and, without a doubt, the support and help of Vince Fumo and Bob Brady. That's the way it is" (Dent 2015b). With two Italian-American councilmen elected from South Philadelphia and the northeastern "river wards," Kenny formed the conservative "Fumocrat" voting block (Marder 1995). Indeed, well into his second term in 1997, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* called Kenny "a distinctive, populist and often contrarian voice in Philadelphia politics, an outspoken critic of the public schools, of civilian oversight of the police department, and of most of the liberal agenda put forth by his colleagues on council" (Marder 1997).

Still, holding an at-large seat meant that Kenny always faced electoral competition and had to win far more votes than his district-based colleagues. This led him to reach out to a broader range of constituents beyond the South Philadelphia Fumocrat base and pay attention to shifting political trends, most notably the success of gay-rights advocates in preventing a virulently homophobic at-large incumbent, Francis Rafferty, from winning reelection in 1991. By the mid-1990s, Kenny had become a key council ally of the LGBT community (Dent 2015b). He also focused on environmental issues. After the 2007 mayoral election seemed to turn on questions of sustainability and the city's role in environmental protection and stewardship, Kenny helped to establish and chaired a city-council committee on the environment.

The 2015 mayoral election

Michael Nutter, who, like Kenney, had first been elected to city council in 1991, was elected mayor in 2007 and reelected in 2011. Term limits thus made 2015 an open race, with virtually all attention focused on the Democratic primary. Six candidates declared by the end of January, but only three were serious: state senator Anthony Williams, former district attorney Lynne Abraham, and Kenney, the last to declare. Kenney poached some campaign staff from the short-lived candidacy of former city solicitor Ken Trujillo, and he expected to get the backing of major unions.

Four factors helped Kenney to win the May primary (the general election was treated as a foregone conclusion). First, he drew on a coalition that included Black, White working-class, and liberal groups. Second, his ability to do so was based on more than 20 years of work on the council, during which he went beyond—but never abandoned—his Fumocrat base. Third, Kenney's numerous alliances provided a broad fundraising base, particularly through political action committees (PACs) funded by unions and LGBT groups, which spent more than \$4 million in support of his campaign (Brennan and Terruso 2015). (His opponent Anthony Williams got more PAC money—over \$5 million—but almost all of it came from the founders of a suburban financial firm, and almost exclusively because Williams supported charter schools; Hepp 2015; Otterbein 2015; Brennan 2015). Finally, the electorate liked Kenney's campaign pledges to establish universal prekindergarten, create jobs by expanding the Philadelphia port, end stop-and-frisk police practices, decriminalize marijuana, and support new immigrants. He had a clear and long-standing record on these and many other issues. As one pollster put it, Kenney's position on marijuana

decriminalization communicated “that he understood the impact of harsh drug laws and unequal enforcement in minority communities” (Fitzgerald 2015).

Kenney as mayor—and Donald Trump as president

After taking office, Kenney emphasized universal prekindergarten, for which he would need an estimated \$60 million. His funding proposal was, ironically, an even higher soda tax—3 cents per ounce—than that which had been proposed by Mayor Nutter, which Kenney had twice failed to support. The expected \$400 million in new revenue (over five years) from Kenney’s proposed tax (levied on soda distributors) was to fund not only prekindergarten but also new community schools, green infrastructure, improvements to parks and recreation centers, and investments to the pension fund (Terruso 2016).

In mid-June, after much wrangling and debate, city council voted 13–4 to approve a 1.5-cent-per-ounce tax on sweetened beverages, including diet drinks, which was projected to produce \$91 million annually in new revenue. Credit for passage was attributed to Kenney’s connecting the new tax with universal prekindergarten, as well as to neighborhood-based projects important to district councilmembers; the bill’s introduction during Kenney’s ostensible “honeymoon” period with council; the fact that councilmembers would not face reelection until 2019; and the sizable proportion of the new revenues that would go toward funding pensions, which was important for some fiscally conservative councilmembers who ended up being swing votes (Nadolny and Terruso 2016).

As the city began to implement the soda tax and defend it in court (it was ultimately upheld in 2018 by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court), Donald Trump won the presidency in November 2016. Philadelphia’s “sanctuary” status quickly emerged as a point of contention between the Kenney and Trump administrations. (Mayor Nutter had limited the city’s cooperation with federal immigration enforcement in response to the Obama administration’s deportation policies.)

Because the Trump administration threatened to withhold federal funds from sanctuary cities, the city of Philadelphia sued the US Department of Justice and won a favorable federal court ruling in June 2018, noting that the new federal requirements were “unconstitutional, arbitrary, and capricious” (Zorilla 2018). Kenney did a widely publicized “happy dance,” which a White House spokesperson quickly labeled “disgusting.”

Making a progressive mayor

Trump’s election pushed progressivism leftward across the nation. Attention shifted toward Stockton, California, mayor Michael Stubbs’ proposed experiment in universal basic income and toward self-proclaimed “revolutionary” Chokwe Lumumba in Jackson, Mississippi. In Minneapolis, Mayor Hodges lost her reelection when she was outflanked on her left by several candidates, including the current mayor, Jacob Frey (Greenblatt 2017). Back in Philadelphia, voters in 2017 elected arguably the most liberal district attorney in the city’s history, Larry Krasner, who, among other things, promised never to pursue the death penalty, to end cash bail, and to seek alternatives to incarceration.

Kenney’s soda tax, universal prekindergarten, and battle over sanctuary status all received national press coverage and helped to cement the mayor’s progressive reputation. The mayor has been roundly criticized for his backtracking on ending stop-and-frisk (*Inquirer* Editorial Board 2018), the policy causing the most conflict between his more liberal and more conservative White working-class supporters. And yet, as various people float names of potential challengers in the 2019 Democratic mayoral primary, only two people (Councilwomen Cindy Bass and Helen Gym, both unlikely to run) would be to the left of Kenney (Brennan and Otterbein 2018).

Kenney seems likely to win reelection and shows little interest in a higher office. Facing no electoral pressure after 2019, he can just be himself. His Twitter account may become entertaining once again. More importantly, he will face decisions that will move him closer to either his liberal or more conservative White working-class constituents, especially around police reform (though having Krasner as DA likely takes some pressure off the mayor). Given that many of those White working-class constituents live outside of the city (their PAC dollars through their unions were arguably more significant than their votes), Kenney seems likely to put his city constituents first and remain an increasingly progressive mayor until at least 2024.

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Richardson Dilworth is a professor of politics, Interim Head of the Department of Politics, and Director of the Center for Public Policy at Drexel University in Philadelphia. His research and teaching focuses on American urban political development, urban environmental policy, and community economic development. He is the author or co-author of numerous essays and articles, author of the book *The Urban Origins of Suburban Autonomy* (Harvard University Press, 2005), and the editor or co-editor of seven books, one of the more recent being, with Christine Palus, *The CQ Press Guide to Urban Politics and Policy in the United States* (SAGE Publishing – CQ Press, 2016). Besides Drexel, he has taught at Johns Hopkins University, Temple University, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, Wagner College, the University of Tirana in Albania, and Shanghai Jiao Tong University in China. Dilworth has held visiting positions at the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia and the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, and he served on the Philadelphia Historical Commission for eight years. He received his BS in economics from New York University, and his PhD in political science from Johns Hopkins University. He lives in South Philadelphia with his wife, daughter, and son.

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