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ROBERT MOSES SPEECHES

John LaGuardia

REMARKS OF ROBERT MOSES
CHAIRMAN OF THE TRIBOROUGH BRIDGE AND TUNNEL AUTHORITY
AT A LUNCHEON OF THE
JOINT CENTER FOR URBAN STUDIES OF THE
MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
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CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS
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12:30 P. M.

Mr. Moynihan and Urbanists,

I rise to a point of order. May I, to take the curse off your guest, present, whether authorized by the rules or not, a flower of my academic family, my granddaughter Caroline Collins Hunt, out of Radcliffe and Oxford, in Cambridge now pursuing philosophy to its ultimate lair, while I still have a tenuous hold on a stall in the market-place and no leisure or talent to tell you anything of consequence, un-less perhaps by inadvertence in answer to embarrassing questions.

Your chairman suggested I tell you where and why I have stumbled. Here, as the roughnecks say, I cop a plea. Everyone mixed up in government and politics is asked what mistakes he made and whether he would now do things differently. Anybody can be bright after the event. Our big obstacles can not be anticipated. We have no reliable oracles to warn and advise us. We do our best with the resources and support at hand. We are fallible. Mayor LaGuardia used to say admiringly of himself, "When I make a mistake it's a whopper."

You ask me to state my philosophy briefly. Do you recall the English writer and engraver who did the River series? He arrived at the source of the River Leigh late one dismal, rainy afternoon, and repaired to the bar where a small Irishman in a porkpie hat jammed over his ears said to him, "Tell me, in one sentence, in one sentence only, what's wrong with the world?"

Some misguided friends have from time to time buzzed me to do a hot-off-the-dictaphone autobiography full of nostalgic moonings, snappy anecdotes, cartoons of thinly disguised or purely coincidental but easily recognizable personalities and, if possible, bits and dashes of sensational hitherto unpublished gossip. This conventional, contrived, exparte stuff is not my cup of mocha. Instead I have yielded to the urging of slightly mad acquaintances with a bizarre outlook on life, to dragoon former associates, who are entitled to rest, to help do a book of contemporary official records with notes to explain back-ground, atmosphere and outcome.

A reputable publisher has made a generous advance toward the publication of this book, which proves that there is gambling on and off race tracks. It has no final title as yet, but its purpose is to tell those who are coming along something about public service in the lower echelons. I like to think in this context about the small boy who

wanted to start a stamp collection. His father said, "First begin with something simple and let's see if you keep up your interest."

"Like what?," said the lad. "Well, why not try moths? They start small and blossom into butterflies. I'll stake you to ten dollars to begin. First go to the library." "O. K. " A few weeks later his father asked how the collection was coming along. "I don't know, Dad. I'm all confused. I went to the right shelves and borrowed a couple of books, but can't make them out." "What were the titles?"

"Well, one was called 'Advice to a Young Mother' and the other 'What A Young Mother Should Know'."

You ask what are the mainsprings of a fugitive twenty-minute speaker at a small, informal academic lunch. If I hate anybody, which I doubt, I hate an extremist, right or left wing, that is any in-tolerant fanatic who insists on his millennium tomorrow. I could give you endless examples of fanaticism in public works. Lincoln Square was an extension, or outgrowth, of the New York City Coli-seum and represented salvaging the slum between Broadway and the New York Central tracks. Slum clearance, whatever succeeded it, was the objective of the law and the reason for federal aid and writing down of land costs. Half the area had to be full taxpaying housing since the other half was cultural and tax exempt.

Our battle over the right of Fordham University to receive federal and city aid for a new campus carried us to the very doors of the United States Supreme Court. But when the new Metropolitan Opera opened recently, the program carried a history which said that I had maliciously tried to accommodate the new opera house in the basement of the Coliseum at Columbus Circle, with the clear implication that only the intervention of decent people had found a place for it in Lincoln Square.

Along the same line, I recall that this summer when I was asked to come to Jones Beach to meet old associates in the upstate New York park system, of which I was the head for thirty-seven years, the wife of a distinguished Commissioner turned her back on me and stalked out, because I had not supported the Hudson River extremists who denounced as vandalism a needed electric power plant which could easily have been screened. Like Wordsworth in the eyes of his old associate Browning, just for a handful of silver I left them. This same lady knew I had been largely instrumental in obtaining as gifts for state parks two magnificent estates near her own, but I was a destroyer of beauty on the Hudson just the same. I recovered from this snub, and feel just a little sorry for some snooty descendants of the Hudson Valley patroons.

I don't choose the middle road as such. I don't like compromising principles in attaining realizable, immediate objectives, but I will compromise if half a loaf in any given context is really better than none. I do not claim to have the "call". "I suppose," said a sneering critic one day, "you have the applause of your conscience." Perhaps he had something. Maybe this is a harmless vanity which turns aside the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Anyway, it makes for peace of mind.

I shall offer only a few specific off-the-cuff remarks, hardly obiter dicta, and certainly not pontifications representing immediate challenges, and shall not keep you long from your cross-examination which I presume has as its legitimate object to find out whether there is anything back of a welter of words. On such occasions, having in the past been a victim myself, my heart goes out to polite students and even to the spies who may have come out of the cold for a cup of hot coffee.

I like Mr. Moynihan's approach to our municipal problems, because it is honest and forthright, at a time when solutions are mainly the province of demagogues screaming for perfection, smooth politicians with new catchwords and slogans appealing to every racial, religious, sectional and economic faction and minority, image makers,

fanatics, self-anointed wowers, reformers with direct lines to the Higher Regions, far-out critics with long claws and venomous serpents' tongues, ponderous editors, computer analysts and just plain nuts. There is nothing new in this. It is old, cyclical and repetitive, and the astonishing thing is that even educated people think they are observing and living through some entirely new phenomenon. The Greek slogan was "nothing in excess."

At this threshold of science I would not borrow too many metaphors from your vocabulary. It is easy to become the victim of your metaphors. In this instance, referring to the broad, comprehensive, physical planning which brings you together, I would suggest that your procedure follow conventional scientific lines borrowed, let us say, from metallurgy. In making aluminum you begin with bauxite, refine and reduce it and by electrolysis finally produce the pure stuff for the ingots and final products. So it is with the logic of planning. Your first stage produces information, the second knowledge and the final distillation, if you are lucky, wisdom. The trouble with most planners is that they want to begin with wisdom.

Now you will say what does all this diatribe add up to? Well, let me give you two or three specific illustrations. Take housing. It will take \$1,230,000,000 to eliminate the main slums of New York

City. The cooperative movement, led by the needle trades, will do a large part of the task with cheap money. Without government-aided but otherwise self-supporting lower middle income owner tenancy, only new slums, wholly government-owned and operated, with largely relief tenancy, will result. The moving of tenants will be impossible under present spineless political controls. Who in politics wants to acknowledge these unpleasant but indisputable facts? Instead we say the federal government will be our Santa Claus.

I have, to be honest, become sceptical of efficiency systems because government saves at the spigot and wastes at the bung. The trouble is that the big needs, often unexpected and impossible to anticipate, sometimes politically contrived and exaggerated, are terribly expensive, and completely overshadow relatively small economies no matter how conducive to prudence and desirable in themselves. Moreover, to round out the happy metaphor, most of the bock beer we put into barrels and guzzle is just foam on immature malt and hops, and taken in quantity can give you a terrible bellyache.

If I understand him, Mr. Moynihan says, and quite rightly I believe, that family, church and other ancient responsibilities and disciplines must be restored if we hope to meet the problem of negro, Puerto Rican and other slums and ghettos and that such responsibilities come first, ahead of improved housing, schools, recreation, the Four

Freedoms, integration and even human rights. But our political and opinion-making leaders don't go for any such simple and sane reasoning because it represents restraint and, like charity, begins at home.

Some years ago I was to appear in the governing body of the City of New York at a closed session to talk about housing needs. I told the Mayor I would have to point out how many people were flooding in from Puerto Rico and the South, why we could not cope with overcrowding and how an effort should be made to keep these people at home until we could accommodate them decently and adequately. I even suggested a fifty million dollar federal project in San Juan to wipe out their worst slum. The Mayor was horrified and suggested that I stay away. I went, told my story, was not asked a single question and departed with, I believe, the respect of the board, coupled with their devout prayer that I would stay away from future meetings.

I have had precisely the same experience in other contexts. And so it goes with every major municipal problem. They are not insoluble by genuine courage, as distinguished from braggadocio, empty millennial promises, buck passing to Washington and yielding to every obstructionist group, every Johnny-Come-Lately planning expert, every editorial pundit and every racial, religious and sectional minority.

Water supply, sewage and waste disposal, roads, parking, schools, hospitals and health, all are in the same category of works requiring an honest, factual, fearless approach and attack by officials with at least a thirst for martyrdom as well as an instinct for the jugular. Where are such leaders to be found in sufficient numbers for the tasks? Search me. I'm no Houdini. All I can say, based on my own not necessarily persuasive experience, is that we shall have to go back to plain, tough, old-fashioned, dedicated leadership to meet these challenges, and not to gadgets of reform, efficiency systems, mechanical inventions, technological advances, psychiatric and diagnostic clinical analyses, quaint electronic devices, super duper regional planning and administrative bodies, sociological abracadabra, and the lingo, patois and passwords of slick promoters.

When a war breaks out the public is ready to turn to exceptional men, respected but not popular, to save the day, men who promise victory only at the expense of sweat, toil and tears. Some of the challenges of our time are those of at least cold wars and the remedies are the same. In emergencies the cry is always for leadership. City calls to city, state to state and land to land "Show us your man."

It is a hell of a thing to say in collegiate circles, but I doubt whether you can train a man for top leadership. You can equip him,

give him a head start, make him a perfect second-string officer, but leadership seems to be inborne and probably only in rare cases transmittable. Maybe that is as it ought to be.

It reminds me of a story Thomas J. Watson told me about his first employer when his father died and he had to leave high school and give up college to go to work. "My boy," said the manufacturer, "never, never tell a lie, but," he added sagely, "you can be economical with the truth." I may add that my mother gave me only one hint of advice and this in what may seem a slightly sardonic vein, though I don't think she meant it that way. She said, "Robert, I never found it worth my while to lie." And that inheritance, if no other, I have tried hard to live up to.

Almost no one in high office wants to be told that a motorized civilization is bound to glut the roads and that the best we can do will not meet the problem short of approaching much more drastic regulation which will require sacrifice. Careless experts say we shall meet the demands by preferring rails to rubber, substituting regionalism for states, master planning, super duper departments run by administrative giants of an elite corps of experts who are also seagreen incorruptibles, trained to be public tycoons, more business in government, the repeal of Parkinson's Law, rebuilding everything without

hurting or discommoding anybody, and combining immediate, uncompromising slum clearance with revolutionary social objectives.

Here endeth the lesson, if I have any to offer, and the beginning of the interrogation which will enable you to get even with me.

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