

The next mayor faces an incredible, shrinking Chicago



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Wait, I thought only the Republican Party was being torn asunder by a rift between the establishment middle and the fringe. That impression was nailed down, again, last week by the embarrassing fracture among House Republicans over funding for the Department of Homeland Security.

But don't forget last Tuesday's Chicago primary in which incumbent Rahm Emanuel, the so-called establishment candidate, was forced into a runoff election for mayor with progressive Cook County Commissioner Jesus "Chuy" Garcia.

Observers on the right and left expect that Garcia's unexpected success bodes well for progressives and is bad for moderate, establishment Democrats. That includes "centrist" (I don't necessarily agree with the label) and president-in-waiting Hillary Clinton.

They see an uprising among progressives that'll energize the drive to draft the far-left Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., to challenge Clinton. Suggesting that a national movement is afoot to cleanse the Democratic Party of centrist heretics, they also point to

the election of New York Mayor Bill (‘‘I’m a progressive, don’t call me liberal’’) de Blasio. Others said last year’s election of labor-backed Ras (‘‘We are the mayor’’) Baraka as Newark, N.J., mayor energized progressives.

Locally, left-wing Democrats have draped their mantle over the shoulders of Garcia. That’s happened even though, after reading his answers to the Tribune’s candidate questionnaire, I wouldn’t call him the perfect progressive.

The Illinois branch of MoveOn.org (the left’s noisy equivalent of the right’s tea party) endorsed Garcia. The Chicago Teachers Union and assorted progressive activists credit themselves for Garcia’s unexpectedly strong showing and their successes in several alderman races.

So, yes, there is a fissure within the Democratic Party, between the establishment types and progressives.

So what? Frankly, I don’t care about whatever splits are ripping apart whatever political party. More important than political process is the substance of the issues — the incredible, shrinking city of Chicago.

At least give Emanuel credit for trying to confront the city’s calamitous deficits and debt. Give Garcia and his supporters a thumbs-down for not only failing to try to provide some realistic, convincing answers, but for wanting more of the same policies that

are sinking the city and the schools.

How dare Emanuel close down 50 Chicago schools! Keep them open, but don’t ask how to pay for them. How dare Emanuel face the real problem of government labor costs! Pretend that the Chicago Public Schools don’t have to find \$688 million in pension payments in fiscal 2016. Hey, get rid of those red light cameras; they’re only there to make a bundle of money for the city! Jump on Emanuel for finding sneaky ways to increase revenues without raising property taxes. Applaud Garcia when he promises no property tax increases.

In this, progressives are true to form. Pain avoidance is a priority. More and costly programs are desperately needed. Instant gratification trumps the long-term common good. Saving for our children’s future is inconsequential.

Emanuel and Garcia, the latter especially, are criticized for not coming up with a better solution. Few commentators have great ideas either. The problems have become too mind-boggling. Turning over all the tax increment financing, or TIF money, that has been salted away won’t do it. New and higher taxes will fall short. Promises of ‘‘operating more efficiently’’ are hollow. The idea of a state bailout from nearly bankrupt Illinois is preposterous. Don’t even look to Washington. There’s a reason no one is putting

forth a realistic solution: There is none. Chicago is too far in over its head to dig itself out. The only solution is the one whose name may not be spoken: bankruptcy.

It worked in Detroit. Last December, it emerged from what was the nation’s largest municipal bankruptcy after about 17 months of court supervision. Ironically, under bankruptcy, the city’s homicide rate, the highest in its history, dropped 18 percent. The New York Times reported, ‘‘Police average response time dropped to less than 18 minutes, from 58 minutes. Replacement of the city’s streetlights — of which 40 percent failed to work — is in the offing. Detroit isn’t out of the woods yet, but it’s in a better place now than when there appeared to be no hope, none at all.’’

Rip Chicago’s finances out of the hands of the connivers, special interests and political opportunists and give them to a court-appointed manager to oversee the necessary reorganization. Start with Chicago Public Schools and, if necessary, throw in the entire sinking mess, called city of Chicago. Might as well include the state of Illinois too.

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