

# LGBT Purists to Christine Quinn: We'd Love a Gay Mayor. Just Not You.

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Christine Quinn in Manhattan on April 26, 2013

On a recent Sunday morning at the Mandarin Hotel in the Time Warner Center, many of the city's gay glitterati gathered for a Victory Fund champagne brunch to help fill the campaign coffers of LGBT candidates. The wealthy gay men who had paid \$250 to \$1,250 to be in the room included Thomas Schumacher, head of Disney's Broadway production arm, and Andy Tobias, treasurer of the Democratic National committee. Lesbians were also represented, albeit in smaller numbers, among them lobbyist Emily Giske and Joy Tomchin, who produced the Oscar-nominated documentary *How to Survive a Plague*.

Out on the street, a different scene unfolded: A dozen or so protesters waved placards, handed out flyers, and otherwise tried to draw attention as the elegantly turned-out arrivals did their best to ignore them. But it wasn't a typical wedge issue that pitted the two sides against each other across the metal police barrier. The folks outside were gay, too, for the most part, and had come to protest one of the honorees and beneficiaries—not for being gay, but for failing to be sufficiently progressive. For selling out.

On this particular morning, however, the object of their wrath—Christine Quinn, 46, the New York City Council speaker—had avoided them. The most important out gay politician in the city and the presumptive frontrunner to replace Michael Bloomberg as mayor had entered through another door, doing an end run around the entire scrum.

At her public appearances, on the web, in social media, and in the pages of newspapers from the *Daily News* to *Gay City News*, Christine Quinn is being subjected to a protracted ideological litmus test. But no one is questioning whether she's gay enough: She married Kim Catullo last May and frequently takes her to campaign stops—in Staten Island, no less. No, what's at issue on Facebook groups like "Queers Against Christine Quinn" and "Defeat Quinn" is whether Quinn is enough of a liberal to carry the Democratic torch. "In New York City, even the Republican candidates are right on about gay issues," notes Joe Jervis, the blogger known as JoeMyGod. "We finally have the luxury of not just automatically backing a gay candidate *because* she's gay."

With nearly six months to go before the September 10 primary, a small but vocal cadre is hoping to erode enough of Quinn's support among the city's voters to force a run-off instead of a coronation. They think the city can do better than the woman who veteran gay rights activist Bill Dobbs calls "a classic old-style machine politician wrapped in lavender paper."

**Christine Quinn stormed onto** the political stage with impeccable lefty street cred. The daughter of a Long Island union steward, Quinn was barely out of college when she attracted attention as an advocate for affordable housing while working at the Housing Justice Campaign. She was still in her mid-twenties when Tom Duane chose her to run his 1991 campaign for City Council from the Village, Hell's Kitchen, and Chelsea. Duane's win made him, along with Antonio Pagan, the first two out gay men elected to the council. While serving as Duane's chief of staff, Quinn publicly came out herself.

After five years, Duane sent her off to make her own way. "I said, 'You have to go, because you're amazing,'" he tells the *Voice*. "I just knew that she was going to be someone who was going to do good things in the world."

And she did good things. Quinn became head of the New York City Anti-Violence Project, an advocacy group that speaks out against gay-related crimes and provides support to victims. It is widely acknowledged that Quinn turned AVP into a model for how to work with police on such crimes while treating victims with respect and sensitivity. Yet, early in her tenure, she also showed signs that she was more than a warm and fuzzy liberal. She engineered a one-day purge of several staffers that still divides people. Quinn fans say the move was necessary to turn AVP into a professional organization that has helped transform the way the police deal with gay hate crimes; her detractors call it a naked play to consolidate her power. It was not the last time that accusation would be leveled against her.

"In my view, she changed when she took over AVP," says Dobbs. "For the first time, she was the boss. Her head got very big. It exploded!"

**When Duane ran for New York State Senate** in 1999, Quinn took his place in the City Council. LGBT activists hailed the arrival of a can-do progressive whose canny political instincts would finally advance their agenda. As the councilmember for the city's most prominent gay neighborhoods, Quinn immediately emerged as the voice for all gay New Yorkers. Soon, she was introducing landmark legislation mandating that contractors doing business with the city provide the same benefits to employees' domestic partners as to spouses. That bill also marked one of her earliest battles with the mayor: After the council overrode his veto, Bloomberg fought the measure in court until a judge, citing a conflict with state bidding laws, finally voided the bill.

Meanwhile, Quinn kept herself in the public eye. She brought a plate of waffles to City Hall in 2004 to tweak the mayor's refusal to take a public stance on marriage equality. And she could be counted on to hold press conferences and attend rallies whenever an LGBT New Yorker was physically assaulted. "From the day my career began, as a housing organizer to the council, my focus has always been to get things done," she tells the *Voice*. "To deliver to the people I was serving."

Her detractors point to 2006, when her peers elected her speaker, as the moment when she sold out her progressive base. Quinn went from having an adversarial relationship with the mayor to what Duane describes as "working with him when she could, improving what he put forward." Others consider it, more prosaically, as sucking up to a man whose endorsement would help smooth her way into the mayoralty. Two years after becoming speaker, Quinn led the council in overturning two voter referenda on term limits, enabling Bloomberg—and City Council members—to run for a third term.

That single action is likely to define her career, and it exposed fault lines in how people view her. If she does lose the primary or a run-off, it will certainly come back to haunt her. "Among everyone I know, the first thing they say is, 'She betrayed us on term limits,'" said LGBT rights activist Louis Flores.

Quinn defends her term limits decision as "the best decision for the city. I made a decision in 2008-2009, at a moment in time that was the worst economic crisis we've faced since the Great Depression, to give voters consistent leadership or make change," she says. "I know some New Yorkers are not able to vote for me. I respect those who feel strongly. I respect their decision. I hope others will look at the rest of my issues."

Term limits, however, are only the first item on the list of progressive grievances. Detractors call her record one of increasingly cynical maneuvers with one eye toward the city's business elite and the other on right-of-center voters. "She's used the fact that she's a woman, that she was an activist, that she is a lesbian, to justify this doctrine that it's OK to move to the right," says Donny Moss, a filmmaker and animal rights activist who has spent more of his time and money fighting Quinn than anyone else in town. Moss believes she has turned into another opportunistic politician who happens to be gay. "She has betrayed the LGBT community when expedient," he says.

The biggest cloud hanging over Quinn's mayoral campaign remains a secret slush fund that enabled her office to dispense cash either to reward or punish other councilmembers. By appropriating millions to fictitious organizations, her office was able to funnel one-quarter of the total to her own district, with the rest going to projects put forward by her allies—and none to her enemies. Quinn has said that as soon as she was made aware of the slush fund, which was in place before she took office, she tried to stop it. But seven months after the scandal was uncovered, Quinn led the council in voting to let the mayor to run for a third term, a move some saw as a stall so she could rebuild her base and live to run another day. A formal probe cleared her of any wrongdoing, but the investigations and mud-slinging continue—as do the City Council's payments to the law firm handling the matter.

Quinn's close relations with the police department are similarly cited as proof of her lack of ideological purity and how, on key issues involving police-community relations, progressive critics believe she is on the wrong side every time. Those ties date back to her years at AVP, but it is her recent support of stop-and-frisk that has drawn the most heat. Tensions in minority communities were already high over the policy, which allows officers to search citizens without formal probable cause. (Statistically, those citizens are mostly African-American and Hispanic young men.) And when the police shot 16-year-old Kimani Gray on March 9 in East Flatbush,

igniting a series of violent street demonstrations, Quinn's slow response infuriated her would-be liberal base.

Gay men of color are just as affected by stop-and-frisk as anyone else, notes Fordham University political science professor Christina Greer. "Even though the face of the LGBT community in New York City is white men, that's not the makeup," she says. "If you're black and gay, stop-and-frisk may be a primary issue." Unlike her three Democratic rivals, Bill de Blasio, John Liu, and Bill Thompson, Quinn has refused to make a blanket condemnation of stop-and-frisk.

Then there's condom-carry, an issue particularly troubling to those fighting the ongoing AIDS epidemic. As the *Voice* has reported, the city vigorously supports and promotes condoms through the Department of Health, but allows police to arrest alleged prostitutes found to be carrying them. Transgender women complain that the NYPD targets them simply because of the way they're dressed. Quinn reportedly sent staffers to a key meeting on the issue instead of attending herself.

Quinn's supposedly complacent attitude toward the NYPD extends all the way up to the commissioner. Her refusal to state categorically that a Mayor Quinn would not re-appoint Ray Kelly marks one more fundamental disagreement between her and the three men vying for the Democratic nomination for mayor.

**What looks like ignoble pandering** to some, however, looks like a delicate balancing act to others. "She has both the advantage and disadvantage of having to govern as speaker," says Brad Holyman, who took over Duane's seat in the state Senate. "Her opponents, for the most part, have never had to take a position that has citywide ramifications in terms of legislation."

Duane defends Quinn's need to maintain a working relationship with the police commissioner in similar terms. "Destroy her relationship with Commissioner Kelly?" he asks. "As someone who is holding a high-level position for which she has to work with the commissioner appointed by the mayor? How would that help anybody?"

On stop-and-frisk, Quinn doesn't have the luxury of simply disregarding city policy, Duane insists. "She has to work under the policies the mayor has set," he says, "or she'd have to resign." Quinn has instead advocated for changes in police training and for the appointment of an inspector general to monitor the NYPD. Such a diplomatic solution doesn't satisfy critics like Flores. "If Christine Quinn was the head of AVP today, she would be fighting [stop-and-frisk]," he says. Quinn did make one major concession last week when she agreed to allow a council vote on allowing victims of racial profiling to sue the NYPD—the first time she hasn't blocked a bill that she opposes.

On condom-carry, Quinn certainly doesn't equivocate. "Condoms being found on somebody and used against them should be changed," she says. "If I have the power to make direct changes, I will. We need to encourage safe sex. Whether for money or not, we cannot talk out of both sides of our mouths."

As more proof of her being on the right side of history, supporters offer up Quinn's efforts to control police entrapment—a standout issue for LGBT New Yorkers, and gay men in particular. In the years before Stonewall, it was common to send good-looking plainclothes cops undercover to solicit sex and then arrest anyone who came on to them (often after the cop initiated the encounter). And while far less common now, these stings have continued. Activist Robert Pinter was arrested in 2008 and has been fighting ever since to clear his name. Dobbs and Moss both blame Quinn for being slow to condemn the sting, but Pinter disagrees, praising Quinn for her quick response. "She organized a huge meeting in her office that entailed all the elected gay officials, organizations, the NYPD and the chief of the Vice Squad, representatives from the mayor's office and her office," Pinter says. "The Vice Squad said they'd pull back and review what they're doing. That's as close as you'll get to an admission of having done something from the police."

Duane praises Quinn for doing "an amazing job building trust and good relationships between the NYPD and the LGBT community. There are many elected officials who are unwilling even to try."

Quinn repeatedly tells the *Voice* that she tries to find a balance between opposing sides. She sees her role as speaker as one of "getting things done," she says, "not just rallying and screaming." Calling her negotiating skills "amazing," Duane ticks off a record of clear stances on progressive issues that include school bullying, funding to open the nation's first LGBT senior center, fighting Rudy Giuliani and Bloomberg to keep the city's HIV/AIDS Services Administration running and sufficiently funded, keeping libraries open, and exposing "family planning clinics" as fronts for anti-abortion groups.

To her critics, Quinn's main accomplishment has been her ability to turn everything into an opportunity to solidify support among the city's power brokers. And there's no question that the real estate industry has donated far more to her than to her rivals. Two recent attack ads from a group of political activists imply that these are kickbacks for back-room deals, but that doesn't take into account the tremendous pressures her own council district—which includes the massive Hudson Yards—is under from developers, more than anywhere else in the city.

Even the Quinn-brokered deals that seem most clearly tainted, like redeveloping Chelsea Market or the conversion of St. Vincent's Hospital into luxury housing, are more complicated than they look. For starters, Quinn is sitting across the table from experienced lobbyists and lawyers well versed in how to manipulate the city's arcane regulations to get what they want. In the case of Chelsea Market, she faced the threat of losing the whole ground-floor food court. And about her contentious decision to close St. Vincent's, Hoyleman says, "No elected official worked harder to keep that hospital open. The person who closed that hospital was [then-Governor] David Paterson."

Without some concessions to developers from the city, it's doubtful that a single unit of affordable housing would have been built in any of these projects, let alone an urgent-care facility, funds for a new school, and a contribution to a planned AIDS memorial—as the St. Vincent's deal demands. "You move things forward as much as you can," says Duane. "The amount of affordable housing she's incentivized among developers is amazing."

**Even when Quinn has been** able to push LGBT-related legislation through the City Council, her critics denigrate it as too little, too late. Trans activist Pauline Park has condemned Quinn for "collaborating with the mayor's office" on an anti-school bullying program that Park called "completely ineffective." But Quinn had to hammer out something agreeable to the mayor after he vetoed her original plan. Meanwhile, Quinn lobbied in Albany for the Dignity for All Students Act, which has since become law.

Nathan Schaefer, the head of the Empire State Pride Agenda, one of the major LGBT rights groups that have endorsed Quinn, got to know her when he was public policy director at GMHC. He praises her work directing council funds toward HIV education and prevention. "We feel very strongly that she is the best candidate with the most vision for the future of the city and the strongest record of delivery to the LGBT community," he says. "That's why we felt it important to come out for an early endorsement."

Hoyleman, too, commends her use of the speaker's office to put LGBT issues front and center. After an outbreak of meningitis among gay men, which the *Voice* recently reported, he worked with her on a recommendation that insurers cover vaccinations. "I'm not sure that, if we didn't have an LGBT speaker, we could have gotten that done as quickly as we did," he says.

Dobbs complains that "she's not just tough, she's vindictive," but no recent mayor has been exactly touchy-feely. And Quinn's defenders say she has similarly—if not always pleasantly—transformed a toothless City Council into an effective counterweight to Gracie Mansion and Albany. "People forget what the City Council was like before she became speaker, how profoundly she changed the institution," said Rachel Lavine, a New York State Democratic committeewoman and longtime LGBT activist who's served on the board of the LGBT Center and Victory Fund and headed the Gay and Lesbian Independent Democrats. "She is very smart on policy. It would be nice to have a mayor who doesn't rely on her staff, but gets it firsthand."

**Are the LGBT anti-Quinn** activists holding her to a higher standard because she's one of their own? "Almost all the vocal opponents of Christine Quinn are gay," Jervis says. "They're saying, 'My idol has disappointed me.' We hold ourselves to higher standards, so we feel doubly betrayed when they fall short."

Judging from the star-studded invitation to an upcoming fundraiser, many of the city's notable LGBT personalities are following actress Cynthia Nixon to back Bill de Blasio. But as public advocate, de Blasio is running with the benefit of having one of the most ambiguous, least powerful, and least accountable jobs in city government. Both of Quinn's other primary opponents have served as city comptroller, another largely advisory position, with direct control only over pension funds. In other words,

not one of Quinn's Democratic rivals has been compelled to push legislation through the council and convince the mayor to sign it into law.

As speaker, Quinn has to deal with every issue affecting the entire city. That means working with 50 other councilmembers who span the political spectrum. "She's the most progressive speaker we have ever had," Duane says. "She's brought people from South Brooklyn to Staten Island to the Northwest Bronx together—not just the liberal West Side of Manhattan, but throughout the city."

The city may be overwhelmingly Democratic, but it hasn't elected a Democratic mayor in 20 years. The record of progressives in city government is terrible. The last effective progressive mayor held office in the '30s—and Fiorello La Guardia was a Republican. Holding progressives to a platonic ideal of virtue has never worked. "The fringe left is just as strident as the Tea Party on the right," says Pinter.

In the end, all the Facebook postings, voter outreach, blogs, protests, and op-eds may not sway voters who recognize the historical importance of a female and out gay mayor living in Gracie Mansion. LGBT voters will likely choose identity over ideology, as they did in Houston, where another out lesbian mayor, Annise Parker, coasted to re-election as a pro-business fiscal hawk.

There's also a generational divide at work here. "Invariably, it's the older gay people who are supportive of us," says Moss. "The younger ones look at us like we have three heads." He attributes this to the wisdom of age, but Dobbs may be closer to the truth: "As the gay movement has made gains, the grassroots has withered," he says. The gay rights movement was supposed to be about winning a place at the table. Is the LGBT community willing to lose that because Christine Quinn doesn't pass the purity test? "This is a historic moment," says Hoylman. "To elect one of our own in New York City—that can't be underestimated."

"Whether I think she's worthy is probably a moot issue, because she'll win in a cakewalk," says Jervis. "If Christine Quinn is elected, she'll be the most powerful and visible gay politician in the history of the world. That's a landmark achievement we can look forward to—in spite of the issues."

*This article was corrected to reflect the fact that while Chris Hughes and Sean Eldridge were invited, they did not attend the the Victory Fund champagne brunch fundraiser.*