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The final interview with Mayor Bernie Sanders



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STEPHEN MOUNT

Eight years ago, Bernard Sanders shocked the Burlington political establishment and beat out five-term Democratic incumbent Gordon Paquette by ten votes. It put Burlington on the map.

And now, Bernie Sanders is retiring as Mayor of Vermont's largest city. "I've been mayor for eight years, and that's a long time," Sanders said in an interview last week. "When you're a mayor, you don't just sit in an ivory tower. You're dealing with (dozens of) issues, you're knocking on doors, you're dealing with people who are upset that dogs are barking in the middle of the night, with police problems, and everything else. You do get a bit tired after eight years."

Sanders was born in Brooklyn in 1941, son of a Polish emigre. After graduating from college, he moved to Vermont, in 1968, and made the Green Mountain State his home.

In January of 1972, Sanders ran for his first public office, that of United States Senator, on the Liberty Union (LU) ticket. He received only 2.2 percent of the vote. Nine months later, he ran for his second office, that of governor. This time he only received 1.2 percent of the vote.

In 1973, Sanders became the Chair of the LU Party in Vermont and he ran for the Senate again in November of 1974, this time doubling his previous vote intake to 4.1 percent. In 1976, he ran for governor again, but was defeated. He soon left the LU Party, discouraged with its inner politics.

Before he left, though, the party reached official Vermont State Major Party status by pulling in more than seven percent of the vote in a major election.

For the next four years, Sanders produced film strips, wrote, and did carpentry. He did much work on his political idol, turn-of-the-century Socialist Eugene Debs.

In the summer of 1980, Sanders began to think seriously about running for mayor of Burlington, and by fall, his mind was made up.

He had an opponent in the third-party field, though. Greg Guma, then an editor on the *Vanguard Press*, had also expressed an interest in running as a progressive. Guma suggested to Sanders that some kind of meeting between the local progressives to choose a candidate take place.

Sanders refused, saying that he was running regardless, and that Guma was welcome to run as well.

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Sanders retires as B-town's mayor

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In the end, Guma did not run, his devotion to the progressive cause outweighing his desire to be mayor. Had Guma run and split the progressive vote, there is no telling how different Burlington politics would be today.

Sanders made his politics known, and they appealed to many who wanted change. His 1981 campaign slogan was "Its Time for a Change, Real Change." His door-to-door grass roots campaign won over just barely enough people to win him the office.

Many considered the win a fluke, but the rise of the Progressives on the Board of Aldermen in 1982 and Sanders's reelection in 1983 put all doubts to rest. Bernie Sanders, and his now well-established third party were here to stay.

Sanders has had many accomplishments in office that he is very proud of, some tangible, some intangible:

"Some of the best memories are the pride and satisfaction of being a part of something which has never been done in any other city in the United States of America. This is the only city in which a political movement has developed which has taken on and defeated the Democratic and Republican parties. That's not an insignificant accomplishment.

"I have also had the satisfaction of working with some fantastic people," he continued. "Two years ago I was able to defeat a candidate who had the combined support of both the Democratic and Republican parties (Democrat Paul Poirier), and I'm confident that we can do the same thing this time with Peter Clavelle. You can't do that without good people." "But I think that deep down, the best accomplishment is an intangible. And the intangible is that I think that in a country that is increasingly cynical about politics and government and believe that government will and does not represent them, in Burlington I think that people believe that they are the government. We have significantly increased the democratic, with a small 'd,' spirit in the City of Burlington. I think that is most significant."

But Sanders's term in office has not all been pride and satisfaction. He does leave office with a real sense of unfulfilled potential where certain issues are concerned:

"There is no question that a real source of frustration has been the fact that between the legislature and the courts, both of which

were protecting the interests of people who have a lot of money, we were unable to go forward as quickly as we wanted to go.

"For example," he continued, "the city correctly took away the tax exempt status of the Medical Center Hospital of Vermont. The lower court overrode that action and basically supported the Medical Center. The City of Burlington signed a probably unique document with the cable television company that would have limited rate increases to just above inflation. The court threw out that agreement.

"The people of Burlington passed legislation that would have allowed us to make fundamental changes in the tax structure of the city and break our dependency on the property tax. That's what the people overwhelmingly supported, that's what the legislature refused to allow us to do."

"So a great source of frustration is that time and time again, we have done

the case now."

Reform of the commission form of government has been a pet project of Sanders's since he took office. The most glaring problem he first saw was that the poorest of Burlington's six wards, Wards 2 and 3, had very little representation in the commissions.

Sanders repeatedly offered up Ward 2 and 3 candidates for open commission positions, but only one ever passed through the Board of Aldermen. With no doubt, the partisanship and the fact that the Progressives have never held a majority on the Board is to blame for this disappointment Sanders has.

Another perennial thorn in Sanders's side has been the Waterfront: "The Waterfront is a tricky issue in this sense: What we have done is stop the kinds of development that we don't want. We have rezoned the Waterfront to make it impossible for there to be a bad type of Waterfront development, and that was

is that instead of a progressive movement, you have Bernie Sanders and friends, and that happens not to be the case, because none of that would have been accomplished unless we had a strong movement consisting of hundreds of people. It is absolutely appropriate that after eight years, that movement develops new leadership to keep it vital and dynamic."

And what about Sanders's political future?

"The answer to the question of my political future is, I honestly don't know. That's a decision that's not just up to me to make. I'm part of a state-wide Progressive movement, and we're going to have to assess where we're going. My honest answer is that I have not ruled out the possibility of running for state-wide office, but I have certainly not decided that I will do that."

Sanders also had some advice for Peter Clavelle, whom Sanders believes will succeed him as Mayor of Burlington. It is advice to continue to do some of the things that Sanders has been most widely criticized for:

"What Peter must continue to do is show the people of Burlington and the State of Vermont the relationship between what happens on the national level and its impact on all citizens. Because, ultimately, we are not going to be successful in terms of environmental protection, housing, child care, education, et cetera, unless there are radical changes in national priorities.

"Now, I've been criticized for doing that," Sanders said, "but I think we are right, in the Progressive movement to point out that if we spend millions of dollars killing Nicaraguans, not only is that immoral unto itself, but it is immoral in that it is wasting money that could be spent on education or child care back here. He must continue to point out the absolutely irresponsible and irrational priorities being established in Washington. That's what Peter will do, I'm confident, that no Democrat or Republican will do."

Bernie Sanders has made a mark on Burlington politics that few other politicians have. That no one can deny. In fact, according to a *Burlington Free Press* poll, the majority of Burlingtonians feel that they and the City are better off now than they were when Sanders became mayor. If nothing else, Bernie leaves knowing that.

For now, at least, we say good bye to Bernie Sanders.

So ends an era in Vermont politics.

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*—Bernard Sanders
Outgoing Mayor of Burlington*

sensible things, good things, and yet, either the courts or the legislature, protecting the interests of those who have money, have not allowed us to go forward."

As he leaves the office of mayor, Sanders also has some unfinished business that he hopes the next mayor will finish. The problems with taxes and the Medical Center and UVM is one, but a fundamental change in the way Burlington goes about its everyday business is the other:

"The commission form of government needs to be changed significantly. We have made some improvements, but not as many as we should have. Ultimately, it is the elected officials of the city, the people who are elected by the people, who are going to have to take responsibility for the running of all the departments in the city. That way, when the departments do a bad job, people can point their finger at an elected official. That is not

a major accomplishment.

"Now, people may argue, Well, you haven't brought down private development on the Waterfront. That's true, but I'll be honest with you and tell you I don't stay up nights worrying about it. What is more important is developing public amenities for people, and later on we'll have the mixed development we want.

"But what is absolutely important," Sanders continued, "is that you guarantee public access to the Waterfront for the people and their children and grandchildren, and we have done a pretty good job of it."

Many people cannot imagine the Burlington political scene without Bernie Sanders in the picture. But he feels that it will be good for the movement for him to hand over the reins to someone else.

"I honestly believe that it is a healthy thing for a movement to have change in leadership. If you don't, then what people perceive