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# REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

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## The New Yorker's woefully lacking profile of NYC mayoral hopeful Christine Quinn

**Press Criticism** | By Craig Guirann | Politics, Legislation, NYC

Apr. 4, 2012 — In “Mayor Presumptive,” [Rebecca Mead's New Yorker profile of New York City Council Speaker Christine Quinn](#), we learn that

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Quinn had lost 25 pounds in the period leading up to last year's ceremony marking the completion of the refurbishing of the Council's wing of City Hall; that she had gotten the shoes she wore for the ceremony on sale for \$24 from a New Jersey outlet mall; that she has “a populist touch” like former New York City Mayor Ed Koch; and that she is “an effective public speaker, with a biography that ties her persuasively to the city's master narrative of immigrant striving, of survival and success.”

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Mead doesn't leave us completely empty-handed. Quinn and Mayor Michael Bloomberg “conduct an easy banter,” and she determined early on that “cooperation would be more fruitful than confrontation.” She has supported the Mayor “in the quality of life issues through which he has sought to change the tone of the city” (including the laudable effort to create “congestion pricing” to reduce automobile traffic); has proposed modest initiatives that have aligned with the Mayor's policies, and has provided Bloomberg with “crucial assistance by leaving certain things undone.”

By this last item, Mead was referring to Quinn's having declined to bring to a vote a bill that would have given employees, including employees of small businesses, the right to paid sick leave.

### No Council democracy

Curiously, Mead describes Quinn's quashing of the bill as something that “infuriated left-wing supporters.” In fact, the bill, [which would have given a maximum of five paid sick days a year to employees](#) of companies with fewer than 20 employees, is co-sponsored by 37 members of the City Council. That is 11 more than a simple majority of the body, and three more than a two-thirds, veto-proof majority.

The quashing of the bill — the refusal to permit a vote — wasn't a matter of disappointing a few Council left-wingers. It thwarted the will of the overwhelming majority of Council members, and it was representative of the Speaker's practices. As pointed out in the [2011 "report card" on the City Council](#) issued by the Human Rights Project at the Urban Justice Center, when it comes both to the holding of hearings and the scheduling of votes on matters that have gone through the hearing process, "The Speaker, in practice, dictates the legislative agenda, largely irrespective...of the support demonstrated in Council for items of legislation."

Thus, for example, a bill that would [require owners of multiple dwellings to post a notice describing the rights of tenants](#), co-sponsored by 32 Council members, hasn't even been permitted a hearing. More prominently, she kept another bill with majority support in the Council — one that would [require developers that receive substantial City subsidies to pay workers a "living wage" of at least \\$10 an hour](#) — [bottled up for well over a year](#). Quinn was recently reported to have come up with a revised plan that would allow the bill to go through, but [wants to exempt Hudson Yards, one of the City's largest development projects](#).

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To me, it seems like the absence of democracy in the legislative body over which Speaker Quinn presides is a governing characteristic that should have made it into a profile.

## Creating a climate of fear

According to Mead, Quinn's approach has made her "thick-skinned and predisposed to forgiveness." Tell that to a member of the City Council (none of whom are to be seen in Mead's profile).

It is well understood — no, universally understood — that a system of rewards and punishments is firmly in place. Quinn supporters get Committee Chair assignments (and the stipends that go with them), as well as favored treatment for projects in their districts; those who would dare oppose the Speaker are frozen out. As the [New York Daily News pointed out](#), "Awards of lulus — and the threat of removing them — are blatant vote-buying tools."

## Lack of oversight and betraying voters

In the Mead version of Quinn, there appear to be no skeletons in the closet. But back in 2008, [a scandal emerged concerning the practice of doling out grants to phantom not-for-profit groups](#). In an excellent imitation of Captain Renault in Casablanca, Quinn asserted that she was shocked — just shocked — to find out that the practice was going on. But the questions raised about her ability to oversee her office — let alone about her veracity — have never been adequately answered.

In the public's mind, though, much more galling was the role that Speaker Quinn played in overturning the term limits that City voters had twice insisted on. In Mead's cryptic telling, "the financial crisis of 2008, and the Mayor's consequent conviction that he alone was equipped to steer the city during an economic emergency resulted in the extension of term limits."

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Does Mead really believe this to be the motivation and the mechanism? Perhaps so. Elsewhere in her profile, she writes that, when Bloomberg was elected, "his exorbitant wealth was widely seen as guaranteeing his purity of purpose." She may well still be operating in the grip of this kind of Bloomberg-*philia*, a widespread ailment of the New York press corps.

In fact, the Mayor simply wanted to hold the position for four more years and grabbed the rationalizations at hand. But he couldn't, much as he might have wanted to do so, simply proclaim that new rules were in effect. To accomplish his desires, he needed, as Mead delicately puts it, "crucial, if controversial, support from Quinn."

In other words, if there were any lawful authority to undo what New York City voters had done by referendum (and that was a substantial legal question), the authority would have to come from an act of the City Council. And nothing gets through the City Council without Chris Quinn's green light. The overriding of existing term limits wasn't a mysterious result, it was a *decision by Quinn* to ride roughshod over the will of City voters and extend not only the Mayor's permissible time in office, but also the time that she and her colleagues could serve.

No questions for Quinn from Mead on these issues either.

## **Raising money is one thing; being a tool is another**

Mead writes that, "Inevitably, any candidate who is not among the handful of the richest people in the city will have to raise money from Wall Street, and from the closely related business of real-estate development."

Leaving aside the opportunities offered by New York City's campaign finance system to give candidates more leeway to be independent, it is certainly true that almost everyone feeds at the Wall Street and real estate troughs. But not everyone is equivalently responsive to those funders.

Quinn, though, is very responsive. One illustration concerns a subject about which I have direct experience. The coop application process in New York has no transparency whatsoever. A family who has found a new home, has gotten the owner to agree to sell the apartment, and has gotten a bank to finance the purchase, still has to run the gauntlet of coop board approval. And if that approval is withheld, every coop (per industry guidance) refuses to tell the applicants why they have been rejected.

In short, the process is one of the last bastions of privilege and unaccountability. Many years ago, I drafted [legislation that would have required prompt disclosure of the reasons for rejection](#). The bill was reintroduced in 2006, and garnered widespread support — at one point having the support of more than two-thirds of Council Members. But transparency has its enemies, and the Real Estate Board of New York and the Council of New York Cooperatives and Condominiums were fierce opponents. They and their hired guns launched a campaign of disinformation and fear. And Chris Quinn? She had pledged to support this kind of legislation when running for re-election to her Council seat in 2005, but she went back on her word and parroted the anti-transparency arguments of the elite opposing a bill.

In this Council term, she had a [window-dressing bill](#) introduced — one that provides for zero required disclosure. The original bill never got a hearing, and, [though reintroduced once more this Council term](#), it has continued to languish.

Quinn might like to talk about doing more to help those who, in Mead’s phrasing, “have been marginalized by the growing disparity between rich and poor,” but her stance against coop disclosure was service to the one percent in its most naked form.

## **Continuing police practices; failing to seek structural change**

“Do I think Ray Kelly is a stand-up, very good police Commissioner who the city would be lucky to continue to have,” Mead quotes Quinn as asking rhetorically. “Absolutely.”

But what about the practice of the Police Department of stopping and frisking massive numbers of New Yorkers each year — primarily those who are African-American or Latino? What about the tens of thousands of arrests for marijuana possession?

Mead doesn’t ask.

Quinn, like many other politicians, is able to summon outrage at individual instances of violence — [she and some of her colleagues recently donned hoodies](#) and demanded an investigation into the death of Trayvon Martin — but has no interest in dealing with the day-to-day reality of discrimination. Under her tenure, the number of City-funded employees at the City’s Commission on Human Rights has fallen to the lowest level in modern times, lower than the lowest levels of the Giuliani administration.

## Who is Quinn?

The New Yorker is not a public policy journal, I know. But I think I'm not the only one of its readers who want to know more about a politician's substance. I didn't need to know that Quinn "chews gum lustily." And I really didn't need to know that Quinn — countermanding her press secretary — did not want an incident of her stepping into a pile of dog poop placed off the record. But Mead and her editor thought that was a nice way to demonstrate just how down to earth Chris Quinn can be. And so ended the profile.

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