

Boston Herald.com

Diversity highlights at-large race



by **Peter Gelzinis**, Monday, September 21, 2009

Regardless of what happens in the mayor's race tomorrow, change is coming to City Hall. The fight for the at-large seats on the Boston City Council signal the dawn of a new era. The council is going to reflect the diverse voices of a new and different Boston.

And that may well prove to be the lasting story of this year's city election. The mayor will find himself dealing with a council that looks different, acts different and will evolve into something more than an afterthought.

Mel King, who ran for mayor 21 years ago, says he's never had more faith than he has in the current crop of council candidates.

From Ego Ezedi, who's run the Roxbury YMCA after working in U.S. Rep. Michael Capuano's Boston office, to Atanna Pressley, who was Joe Kennedy's constituent services coordinator, the at-large field is rich in candidates who transcend hack stereotypes and tired political cliches.

Ray Flynn, the man who defeated King in that mayoral contest, echoed his rival's sentiments.

"With this election," Flynn said, "the neighborhoods of the city will definitely be heard from."

And both men, old friends and rivals who engaged in a campaign that not only changed the city more than two decades ago, but helped to narrow the barriers between neighborhoods, have come together to support the at-large candidacy of Felix G. Arroyo.

Yes, he is the 30-year-old son of the former at-large councilor who became its first Hispanic member, but whereas the father's interests often drifted to global issues, his son has spent his working life laser focused on the city, its residents and their concerns.

We first met two years ago, when the young man from Jamaica Plain was an organizer for SEIU Local 615 and fighting to save the jobs of 30 workers who cleaned offices in the Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill Building in North Station.

Arroyo spoke truth to power with both passion and a common touch. He fought successfully for those who had earned the right not to be put out of work simply because a cleaning contract had changed hands.

“Power is not defined, Ray Flynn once told me,” Arroyo said recently, “it’s perceived. Those willing to fight for what they believe will always be perceived as having a power that is real.

“So, when people say the council has become nothing more than a rubber stamp for the mayor, I say it only takes seven people, seven votes to affect a change.”

“Although I’ve known him for most of his life,” Mel King said, “what impresses me the most about Felix is his ability to listen to what people are saying. I am excited because we haven’t had enough public servants who are truly willing to listen.”