

The Lindsay Administration and the Sanitation Crisis of New York City, 1966–1973

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Abstract

This article examines efforts by the John V. Lindsay administration (1966–1973) to deal with the New York City sanitation crisis of the late 1960s and early 1970s. By this period, the Department of Sanitation could barely function in most low-income neighborhoods of New York City, and this resulted in a series of direct and indirect protest actions. The mass media blamed Mayor Lindsay for the situation and characterized him as an ineffectual city manager. This image has persisted with scholars contending that Lindsay never figured out how to run the city government. This article diverges from these accounts and argues that the Lindsay administration actually rebuilt the Department of Sanitation—a city agency that was operationally breaking down before Lindsay became mayor. In fact, the Lindsay administration popularized the notion that a modern city with global aspirations has to meet the basic spatial needs of its residents and that efficient and responsive sanitation delivery can be achieved through the rationalization of resources and services.

Keywords

sanitation, New York City, John V. Lindsay, municipal services, low-income neighborhoods, urban governance, urban crisis

On June 11, 1970, Richard Green and Charles Wheel in a protest against inadequate sanitation provision in Brownsville, Brooklyn, amassed a large pile of garbage, placed it in the middle of the street, and burned it. In the following two nights and in reaction to the arrest of the two men by the police, small groups of young people looted stores, set fire to vacant buildings, and burned garbage in the streets of Brownsville. Immediately after the disturbances, Mayor John V. Lindsay (1966–1973) ordered an investigation of sanitation services in the area and deployed numerous sanitation trucks for a cleanup. Newspapers and television news quickly verged to the area and termed the disturbances the “Brownsville Trash Riots.” Many of the images showed overflowing garbage, making the point that Brownsville had been neglected by the Department of Sanitation (DS). The DS claimed that it could not service Brownsville and other minority neighborhoods because 30 percent of the city’s garbage trucks were not working. A few months before the riots,

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residents of Brownsville had complained that garbage collection occurred in the area only twice a week, even though Brownsville was designated by the DS as a five-day-a-week garbage pickup area. The city government did not, however, respond to the claims of Brownsville residents, which in June of that year turned into collective violence.¹

The Brownsville Trash Riots were among numerous direct and indirect protest actions of people making claims against poor sanitation provision throughout this period. On February 7, 1968, members of the Tompkins Square Community Center in the Lower East Side dumped garbage from two trucks on East 10th Street between Avenues B and C. This action occurred after community center members rented two trucks, filled them with uncollected garbage from the neighborhood, and sought to dispose it. They drove the trucks to the DS, the Parks Department, and the Mayor's Task Force, seeking a disposal location. All of these agencies told them to go elsewhere. When they tried to dump the garbage into the East River, Coast Guard officials stopped them. The dumping of the garbage on East 10th Street marked the end of this cleanup effort and the beginning of small garbage fires and disturbances by local residents. In January 1969, residents of Queens and other outlying borough areas began to place makeshift anti-Lindsay signs in their neighborhoods after a nineteen-inch snowstorm buried the city and the DS failed to open the streets for days. About 40 percent of the city's snow removal equipment was in disrepair, subfreezing temperatures contributed to additional equipment breakdown, and the private contractor usually hired to supplement DS snow removal operations was banned by the city because of irregularities. When compared to the 1961 response of the DS to a fifteen-inch snowstorm, the 1969 response was almost nonexistent. And the 1961 response had been criticized by the City Club of New York as too expensive and badly executed. On August 17, 1969, residents of East Harlem blocked the neighborhood's main avenues with uncollected garbage and abandoned cars, which they set on fire. This protest action was organized by the newly formed New York chapter of the Young Lords, who discovered that filthy streets were a main preoccupation of neighborhood people. The next day, residents of the Flatlands section of Brooklyn protested the spread of rats in the area because of poor sanitation services. Several children such as eleven-year-old Bruce Bromberg were bitten by rats on their way to school, stores, or other places. The Flatlands-East Flatbush Civic Association had launched various complaints to the city administration without any results. Three weeks after the Brownsville Trash Riots, in the summer of 1970, residents of Kew Gardens in Queens placed garbage cans in the street, protesting erratic garbage collection and a DS plan to temporarily reduce garbage collection there from three to two days a week. On August 13, 1970, about 400 youths in Harlem used brooms to push garbage onto Lenox Avenue between 138th and 139th streets. They were protesting lack of garbage collection in Harlem in the previous two weeks. When sanitation workers arrived with cleaning equipment and trucks, the youths called them names and harassed them. Numerous other, smaller protest actions happened all over the city during this period.²

Did sanitation provision fall apart this much in New York City during the late 1960s? The answer is yes. The DS could barely function, and Mayor Lindsay was blamed for it. During this period, the media attacked Lindsay for his inability to run the government and for the deplorable condition of parts of the city. In 1968, Richard Reeves argued that Lindsay "doesn't seem to have the patience, the perseverance, the interest to bull what he wants through governmental processes."³ Lindsay's former sanitation commissioner, Samuel J. Kearing Jr., stated that "John Lindsay couldn't run a gas station, much less a city."⁴ Jimmy Breslin claimed that when he drove in central Brooklyn in 1969, he went through "block after block of hot, filthy houses and sidewalks lined with garbage cans that never seem to be collected and have been kicked over by dogs and kids. And, on so many streets, a stripped, smashed car, sitting there as a reminder of everything that is brutal and barren about city life."⁵ In 1973, *Time* assessed Lindsay's mayoralty as follows: "[Lindsay] had little patience with the everyday details of running a city. He was an indifferent administrator at best, and had a way of converting the daily conflicts of government into moral crises. Annoyed at having to bargain with people whom he felt to be wrong, he tended

to rebuke them, thus stiffening their resistance to compromise. They were further alienated by his often flippant attitude that bordered on arrogance.”⁶ The City Club of New York concluded that Lindsay’s administration was “in the hands of people who know all about management—or its vocabulary—except how to get a job done.”⁷

The collapse of the DS concurs with accounts that blame Lindsay and urban liberalism for the postwar decline of New York City in general and incompetence over the running of the local government in particular. Charles Morris contends that the Lindsay administration’s liberal tendency to provide comprehensive social services to its low-income populations—mostly blacks and Puerto Ricans—proved too costly and predicated the fiscal crisis of the 1970s. Fred Siegel argues that Lindsay was too arrogant and too righteous to comprehend the needs of working- and middle-class whites in the outer boroughs. Siegel also blames liberalism for many of Lindsay’s decisions and claims that as mayor, he focused on the provision of welfare to minority populations while avoiding a needed war on crime. Vincent J. Cannato views Lindsay as a naïve and egotistical mayor who never figured out how the city government worked. Although, for Cannato, Lindsay the person was flawed, what was even more flawed to Cannato was Lindsay’s liberal political ideology, which drove many of his policies. In recent years, there have been some efforts to rehabilitate Lindsay’s image. In conjunction with an exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York, Sam Roberts edited a collection of essays in which many writers and scholars sought to reassess Lindsay’s mayoralty in a general way. WNET also produced a documentary about Lindsay that aired on various PBS stations. Cannato dismissed these efforts as “part of a well-funded and well-coordinated effort by former Lindsay officials to restore the late mayor’s reputation.”⁸ Although debates about the Lindsay administration and its competence over urban affairs are likely to continue, what is missing here is a recognition that Lindsay was actually responding to what he viewed as urban decline, because inadequate sanitation delivery was functioning as both a metaphor and a reality of a failing large-city government. In fact, the Lindsay administration popularized the notion that a modern city with global aspirations has to meet the basic spatial needs of its residents and that this can be achieved through the rationalization of resources and services.⁹

This article, by focusing on the Lindsay administration’s handling of the sanitation crisis, shows the extent to which a new standard of urban governance began to emerge in the 1960s. Throughout his two terms as mayor, Lindsay tried to determine the reasons behind inadequate service delivery and sought improvements. In these efforts, Lindsay established task forces, hired outside public policy consultants, and filled investigative city agency positions with experts. These entities studied the deficiencies of city agencies and wrote proposals that were gradually implemented by city officials. In the case of sanitation, Lindsay inherited a broken-down agency. His administration realized the magnitude of the problem about a year into his mayoralty. Then, it took about four years for the rebuilding process. The protest actions of the late 1960s and early 1970s show the extent to which the DS had broken down and also how important sanitation was for city residents. Decent sanitation provision was also important for Lindsay himself. Having promised in his 1965 campaign the restoration of comprehensive municipal services in low-income neighborhoods, Lindsay regarded poor sanitation conditions to be one of the most visible and pressing problems. Something had to be done because the fact that the streets, the sidewalks, and lots of many neighborhoods were overflowing with uncollected garbage did not bode well for the future of the city. New York could not sufficiently compete with other global cities or with suburban locations for jobs and middle-class residents if sanitation provision was so inadequate, even if that inadequacy fully manifested itself in low-income neighborhoods.¹⁰

The Initial Discovery of the Problem

In February 1966—about a month after Lindsay took office—Deputy Mayor Robert Price ordered a Crash Clean-Up campaign that targeted a large section of East New York, Brooklyn.

This thirty-day campaign sought to remedy deficiencies in thirty-nine square blocks of East New York by providing additional sanitation services and by flooding the area with sanitation, fire, and buildings inspectors. Price claimed that the East New York rehabilitation program was the first of a series that would deal with blighted areas. During the first week of the campaign, the Buildings Department discovered 8,075 violations in 617 buildings that contained 5,471 apartments. By the end of the campaign, the DS had issued 222 summonses for littering, had removed 1,374 tons of refuse, had serviced 367 bulk refuse stops, and had towed seventeen abandoned cars. Inspectors who investigated commercial establishments found 415 health violations in 101 out of 149 stores. The Department of Real Estate decided to demolish eighty buildings that were rendered unsafe. Twenty-seven additional buildings were boarded up. The city government also planned to rebuild public parks. Residents of East New York were encouraged by this sudden attention from City Hall; however, they did not believe that conditions could be corrected during a thirty-day period.¹¹

In the summer of 1966, city officials found themselves in East New York once again; this time, they were trying to mediate between racial groups that were constantly fighting in the streets and threatened to bring into the conflict other Brooklyn neighborhoods. Lindsay and his close aides wondered why trouble struck a part of the city that, months before, had received a “blitz of services, garbage pickups, demolition of abandoned buildings, the removal of automobiles that, stripped of wheels and engines, littered the blocks like giant bugs.”¹² When they toured the area, city officials discovered that the Crash Clean-Up campaign had failed. Mayoral Assistant Barry Gottehrer realized that “massive short-term aid couldn’t touch the problems of East New York; within weeks the alleys were once again filled with trash, the building inspectors had moved on, leaving the violations uncorrected, and plans for local parks had been stalled in red tape and bureaucratic confusion.”¹³ The surprise that the mayor and his assistants expressed about East New York revealed the extent to which the city administration underestimated the problems that low-income neighborhoods were facing. City officials expected that a quick comprehensive intervention of numerous city agencies would remedy most inadequacies that rove East New York and that the neighborhood would afterward take a road to improvement. They were wrong.

The East New York Crash Clean-Up, which amounted to an obvious failure, showed the difficulty of resuming sanitation provision to low-income neighborhoods. By the time of the disturbances of the summer of 1966—only a few months after the original cleanup—accumulated debris and shattered glass blanketed the streets, disemboweled cars blocked most parking spaces, and empty lots were filled with garbage. After Lindsay visited the area to stop the racial conflict, the DS moved in and swept the streets clean for the first time since the original cleanup. Despite the discouraging results in East New York, however, Lindsay continued to believe that the DS was an organization capable of performing basic sanitation tasks.

In September 1966, the Lindsay administration in coordination with Bronx Borough President Herman Badillo embarked on a six-day-a-week refuse collection program in three highly populated South Bronx sanitation districts. Neighborhoods under this program included Hunts Point, Morrisania, Mott Haven, and Melrose. In a Bronx speech, Lindsay proclaimed that “New York has what I believe to be the largest, best-equipped Sanitation Department in the World” and that “the 10,000 men of the Department work hard to clean up around the City and I commend them for their efforts.” He also urged neighborhood residents to do their part in keeping the area clean.¹⁴

As the South Bronx sanitation program failed and serious long-term scandals emerged toward the end of 1966, the Lindsay administration changed its positive outlook toward the DS. The Department of Investigation discovered that many private cartmen used the disposal facilities of the city without paying the appropriate fee. Instead, they gave DS employees cash. As the practice persisted, the DS transferred 102 foremen and assistant foremen and 123 sanitation workers

from the Waste Disposal Bureau to the Bureau of Street Cleaning and Refuse Collection. In another case, the Department of Investigation found that many sanitation workers paid bribes to superiors in exchange for promotions. Fifty-five promotions to supervisory positions were blocked. Deputy Mayor Price argued that this promotion practice had been taking place for many years. Sanitation workers who wanted to advance took the civil service exam to qualify. The DS placed workers who passed the exam on eligible lists. No promotions were made until the lists were about to expire, however. At that point, superiors demanded money for promotions. Workers who failed to pay lost their eligibility and had to retake the exam. As a result of this scandal, the city administration dismissed First Deputy Commissioner Vincent Starace and suspended or fired more than twenty other supervisory employees. Lindsay also replaced Sanitation Commissioner Joseph Periconi with Kearing. In his resignation letter, Periconi, who had nothing to do with the scandals but was disappointed with his agency's failure to maintain a semblance of cleanliness in the neighborhoods of the South Bronx, wrote, "I firmly believe that the Department of Sanitation is in need of a thorough reorganization at the top levels. Innovations are needed as well in the middle and lower levels of operation."¹⁵ And this letter understated the extent of reorganization that the DS needed. Regardless, at the end of 1966, Lindsay ordered a reorganization of the DS.¹⁶

Conflict over Efforts to Reinvent Government

Meanwhile, the Lindsay administration was working toward a comprehensive remaking of the local government. Although such plans existed during Lindsay's campaign for mayor, the East New York experience made the city administration realize that the improvement of city services was a matter that went beyond the will to pay attention to neglected neighborhoods. In the months after Lindsay's peacemaking visit in the summer of 1966, sanitation service declined again in East New York. The problem was that the DS did not provide regular services that were sufficient for the area. During the 1966 Christmas holidays, garbage was not collected for nine days. In the beginning of 1967, the United Block Associations of East New York sent a petition signed by hundreds of residents to Sanitation Commissioner Kearing requesting daily garbage collection. The organization received no response from the DS. Garbage was collected twice a week, and the streets of the tenement area of East New York were usually not swept. In the beginning of 1968, the United Block Associations sent more complaints. In response, urban planner Walter Thabit, whose firm was working with the Model Cities program of East New York, met with representatives of the DS. When Thabit passed the association's complaints that stated that the DS was not doing its job, DS officials countered that it was the community not doing its job in keeping the area clean. Sanitation representatives also expressed displeasure with the city administration, arguing that it had failed to adequately fund the DS, which lacked essential personnel and machinery. The Lindsay administration had a different assessment of the problem and was already working toward a solution.¹⁷

The idea was to modernize city government in its entirety, so that it could finally become more responsive to the population's needs. The first far-reaching decision was to consolidate about forty of the city's departments into ten superagencies. Agency consolidation was viewed as a way to make city government cheaper and more efficient by eliminating duplication and fragmentation. Governmental duplication meant that various agencies performed the same tasks without much coordination. When Lindsay assumed the office of the mayor, eight separate city agencies had partial responsibility for the winter emergency housing repair program. Three separate city agencies had jurisdiction over the paving of the city's streets. Six agencies collected information about real property and buildings in the city without exchanging that information. Four different agencies operated slum rehabilitation programs and used an array of federal and city funds. Both the Board of Water Supply and the Department of Water Supply, Gas, and

Electricity conducted large studies over the water system; however, each one used different statistical bases and generated different conclusions. Governmental fragmentation, which represented an additional problem, meant that multiple agencies were unable to collaborate with each other and solve pressing problems. For example, when a southern Queens civic leader called the local police requesting that they place barricades around a gaping hole in a vacant lot where children played, she was referred to the Highways Department, which in turn referred her to the Board of Education because a school used to occupy the site. The Board of Education, however, told her that a new school had been built a few blocks away and that the land now belonged to the Department of Real Estate. Investigators from the Department of Real Estate discovered that a demolition contractor for the old school should have closed a sewer drain at the bottom of the hole and then the hole itself, but the contract for the job had ended six months before without completion. The Department of Real Estate did not have the equipment to close the hole, so the problem continued to exist. In New York City, there were hundreds of such examples every month. Lindsay created many of the superagencies through executive orders, although he needed legislative approval from the City Council for a complete implementation of his plan. Despite skepticism, members of the City Council approved most of Lindsay's superagencies. The DS was merged with the Department of Air Pollution Control, the water pollution and sewer elements of the Department of Public Works, and the water supply functions of the Department of Water Supply, Gas and Electricity. The new superagency was named the Environmental Protection Administration (EPA) and was approved in December 1967. The DS continued to maintain its previous field structures and operate as part of the EPA.¹⁸

Besides agency consolidation, Lindsay wanted to create dozens of little city halls, so that the city government could become more responsive to the needs of neighborhoods. The idea of neighborhood city halls was influenced by the East New York and South Bronx experiences. Although this neighborhood city hall plan appeared to be contradictory to the creation of superagencies, many observers argued that the two approaches were consistent and that centralization was a precondition of decentralization. Whatever the case, the City Council and the Board of Estimate opposed this decentralization proposal and refused to appropriate money for the little city halls. By May 1969, only six neighborhood city halls had opened, and they operated through the use of private funds and volunteers. In response to the City Council's reluctance, Lindsay created forty-four local mayoral task forces, which were designed to address the breakdown of services in low-income neighborhoods and to keep City Hall informed of worrisome developments. Lindsay continued to press for neighborhood government agencies, arguing that this was the only way to make the city government responsive to the problems of ordinary people. At the end of 1969, he proposed the merger of the local task forces with the sixty-two planning boards, which were under the jurisdiction of borough presidents, into neighborhood city halls.¹⁹

Sanitation workers and their labor union watched these city government proposals and reforms nervously. In 1966, John DeLury, the leader of the Uniformed Sanitationmen's Association (USA), threatened with a job action if the city government went through with its plans to provide intensive cleanup in minority neighborhoods such as East New York. This threat turned out to be hollow. Still, sanitation workers resented the Lindsay administration's orders to clean minority areas only to be blamed when the streets were dirty again in a few weeks. Sanitation rank and file also disliked both the superagency and decentralization plans, and viewed them as ways to weaken their workers' prerogatives. Sanitation workers felt that Mayor Lindsay and residents of minority neighborhoods were out to get them and that aggressive actions against other public employee unions such as the Transportation Workers Union and the Patrolmen's Benevolent Association would be repeated against the USA.²⁰

The distrust between City Hall and sanitation workers led to the USA strike of 1968, which lasted for nine days. The city's contract with sanitation workers ended on June 30, 1967. Lindsay appointed two mediators to make recommendations on a new contract. The mediators

recommended a basic wage package of \$400, which was higher than the wage increases that police officers and firefighters had received. The mediator also offered double-pay for Sunday work. Satisfied, DeLury presented the package to a sizable rally of sanitation workers in City Hall Park. To his surprise, DeLury was pelted with eggs and booed by the crowd, which grew more restless. Police officers intervened and rescued him. As Charles Morris remarked “[L]ike the police and the firemen, they [sanitation workers] were angry at the city, angry at the changes in working conditions, angry at the apparent preference shown to minorities.”²¹ Realizing that his position was in jeopardy, DeLury raised his demands and led sanitation workers to a strike. Each day of the strike, ten thousand tons of garbage remained uncollected, spilling into the streets and sidewalks. Rats began to overwhelm portions of the city, and fires on piles of trash became common. The health commissioner declared a health emergency, fearing that uncollected garbage could clog sewer drains and cause floods, which would in turn spread hepatitis, typhoid, dysentery, and other infectious diseases. The city administration obtained an injunction against the strike, and DeLury was sent to jail. When the strike continued, Lindsay ordered other city workers to operate sanitation trucks and clean the city, but his instructions were ignored. On the fourth day of the strike, New York Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller promised to intervene but only if Lindsay admitted that he had lost control. On the sixth day of the strike, Lindsay asked Rockefeller to send the National Guard to break the strike and collect the garbage. Fearing violence between sanitation workers and the state militia and expecting a general strike, Rockefeller refused to deploy the National Guard. Instead, he engineered the release of DeLury from jail and restarted the labor negotiations by adding five mediators to the original two. The USA settled for only \$25 additional pay above the original offer. Lindsay, however, refused to accept this settlement and publicly crusaded against it. Rockefeller announced that he would ask the state legislature to authorize a state takeover of the city sanitation services. The state legislature refused to act because it was inundated with mail, faxes, and phone calls from people expressing their outrage against the USA and Rockefeller. Lindsay emerged victorious. Facing hostility from many sectors of the city, sanitation workers did not go on strike again.²²

The strike made sanitation workers even more unpopular and vulnerable in New York. In many sections of the city, sanitation workers were now truly despised. Heckling by neighborhood people became more of a routine affair. Meanwhile, the Lindsay administration continued its quiet work toward figuring out why sanitation provision was so inadequate and implementing initiatives that could remedy the problem. Rockefeller reconsidered his plans of taking over portions of the city government, realizing that New York City was too difficult a landscape politically. Although he flirted with the idea of taking over the city’s police protection and garbage collection functions in 1970, this never really happened.

Improvements in Sanitation Provision

Like previous mayors, Lindsay believed that most sanitation provision problems were related to engineering and technology. Unless trucks, mechanical street sweepers, and snowplow equipment worked, sanitation workers could not collect garbage and clean the streets. In 1966, Lindsay ordered the establishment of a new Central Repair Shop in Woodside, Queens, which absorbed the Sanitation Training Center and a Plant Maintenance Shop in Brooklyn; the DS Central Motors Repair Shop in Manhattan; a tractor repair shop in Elmhurst, Queens; an equipment-painting facility in the Bronx; and other smaller shops. This new Queens central shop had been in the planning for ten years without completion. The DS announced that this consolidation in repair shops would amount to a savings of more than \$2 million annually and would contribute to a more efficient maintenance of its fleet. The Lindsay administration also planned to replace antiquated equipment. An emphasis was placed on the purchase of new garbage collection trucks. In 1967, the city administration succeeded in getting through the City Council and the Board of

Estimate budget modifications so that the DS could buy more trucks. The idea was to purchase 800 trucks in the 1967–1968 fiscal year, 400 trucks in 1968–1969, and 150 trucks in 1969–1970. By then, the DS expected to establish a quota of 1,350 collection trucks that could carry twenty cubic yards of solid waste. Beginning in fiscal 1970–1971, the DS would initiate a five-year replacement program, under which it would be replacing 270 trucks each year. In 1969, DS Commissioner Griswold L. Moeller requested an additional capital budget amendment so that the entire truck fleet could be increased from 1,350 to 1,660. This request was granted. DS officials hoped that the large number of new trucks would reduce overtime work and improve service.²³

Although the new equipment was purchased, maintenance problems persisted and worsened. In 1970, more than 30 percent of garbage collection trucks and more than half of the mechanical street sweepers were out of service at all times. More than half of all equipment assigned in low-income neighborhoods was usually inoperable. Administration officials investigated these shortcomings and discovered a breakdown in the system of repair and maintenance. Work on vehicles was performed by mechanics who worked in the sixty-seven district garages and in two main repair shops, the large one in Queens and a smaller one in Staten Island. In all of these shops, preventive maintenance was never done, meaning that even new trucks broke down. More than this, supervision was minimal, the relationship between central shops and district garages was unclear, and inventory controls were nonexistent. Garage foremen (assigned to the Bureau of Cleaning and Collection) and field mechanics (assigned to the Bureau of Motor Equipment) fought over work priorities. Mechanics did not respect garage foremen because they lacked technical expertise, meaning that frequently no one was fully in charge of garages. Although mechanics at the Queens Central Shop spent half their time not working, performance there was higher than in most district garages. In most garages and repair shops, late starts, early quits, long lunches, and group gatherings were common. Usually, three or four workers were assigned to repair the engine of a single truck; however, most of the work did not allow more than one task being performed on a vehicle at a time, meaning that two to three mechanics were usually hanging out waiting for another mechanic to complete his task. Most repairs cost significantly more than if they were performed by private entities outside the DS. In many cases, they cost twice as much. The avenues of communication between the Department of Purchase, which was in charge of ordering parts, and the DS were inadequate. Equipment was kept in the shops for months waiting for parts that may or may not have been ordered, new parts were usually cheaper than internally repaired ones, and sometimes the wrong parts were ordered.²⁴

And there were even more problems. In 1960, Julius Edelstein, who had been previous Mayor Robert F. Wagner's (1954–1965) executive assistant, summarized the attitude of the USA president as follows: "DeLury decided that part of his job was protecting his men from doing any work."²⁵ This statement had some merits since sanitation workers, with the support of their union, constructed a sophisticated medical leave system under which certificates for disability were bought from doctors and approved by supervisors, who were also paid. Sanitation workers also vandalized trucks and other equipment so that they could avoid work, extorted bribes from local residents and organizations to resume service, brutally beat conscientious supervisors who tried to make them work, and emptied only half of their truck loads so that they could shorten the time devoted for the next day's garbage collection. This last practice of dumping only part of garbage loads was known as "keeping a part, or holding back." City officials, aware of this practice, required trucks to be full before going to landfills and assigned sanitation officers to weigh trucks on arrival and inspect them on departure. Sanitation workers attempted to get around inspections by watering down their garbage to make it heavier and by including rocks and boulders collected from empty lots in their loads. They also stole garbage from the routes of other sanitation workers with more convenient locations such as schools, public housing projects, and hospitals, where garbage was concentrated and easier to collect. And these activities of trying to avoid work did

not include long breaks, arriving to work late, and ending the workday early. Meanwhile, garbage output by New Yorkers had increased so much that even if sanitation workers tried their best, there would still be problems.²⁶

Realizing that sanitation provision had become a pressing political and social problem, Lindsay began to reach out to DeLury and sanitation workers and to implement new cleanup initiatives. Lindsay established a Clean City Task Force, which studied sanitation problems and recommended a number of procedures, including the reorganization of the abandoned car system, the use of plastic bags in trash receptacles, and the civilianization of certain DS jobs. In the primary mayoral election of 1969, Lindsay lost the Republican primary to State Senator John Marchi but stayed in the race as the nominee of the Liberal Party. Marchi and Democrat Mario Procaccino made filthy streets one of the most important issues of their campaigns and portrayed Lindsay as incompetent in matters concerning sanitation. In response, during the summer of 1969, the mayor started many of the programs recommended by his Task Force, including the cleaning of vacant lots and play lots, sometimes with the assistance of community organizations, and the deployment of extra trucks to areas overwhelmed with uncollected garbage. When this proved to be inadequate, the mayor made peace with DeLury and established special Sunday overtime sanitation crews. These crews collected accumulated household garbage in neglected neighborhoods, cleaned debris from empty lots, and swept dirty streets. Special garbage collections only for the four Sundays of September amounted to more than twelve tons of refuse. Impressed by the city administration's gestures, DeLury endorsed Lindsay for reelection. After prevailing in the general election, Lindsay agreed to hire more than 1,000 additional sanitation workers and to continue overtime service. Eventually, this sanitation personnel enlargement along with overtime and new equipment helped to improve sanitation provision.²⁷

Substantive changes in sanitation provision began to occur after the Brownsville Trash Riots of 1970. That year, Lindsay appointed Jerome Kretchmer, a state assemblyman with mayoral ambitions, as his EPA commissioner. Kretchmer, who also became acting sanitation commissioner until the appointment of Herbert Elish, established cordial relationships with DeLury and shed the image of the out-of-touch commissioner by making frequent appearances in the field, where he directed sanitation operations. Although Kretchmer was an ardent environmentalist and went after entities such as Consolidated Edison, General Motors, and beer manufacturers for their lack of environmental consciousness, he also focused on everyday sanitation matters such as garbage collection and street cleaning. This happened because Kretchmer understood that most ordinary New Yorkers cared more about clean streets rather than large-scale environmental issues. DeLury, who had repeatedly criticized previous EPA commissioners for paying too much attention to unsolvable aspects of air pollution and refuse disposal rather than cleaning the streets, embraced Kretchmer's approach.²⁸

Under Kretchmer and Elish, the dream of repairing equipment on time became a reality. The DS opened several borough repair shops, so that pressure could be taken off the central repair shop of Queens, which lacked space. Many repair tasks were also eliminated in garages because of gross inefficiencies. After reports showed that DS mechanics spent substantially more time for the same task than mechanics from the private sector, the DS established productivity standards for certain repair functions. The DS proved its point that existing mechanics had to improve productivity by hiring sixty new mechanics on September 1, 1971. The new mechanics were segregated from the old ones, so that they would not be influenced by poor work habits. As it turned out, the new mechanics were able to easily follow the new productivity standards and registered productivity gains between 50 and 104 percent greater than the average completion time of the old personnel. The old mechanics were unable to follow the new productivity standards, and supervisors began to monitor them more closely and to bring disciplinary procedures against them. In 1971, the DS also established a pilot vehicle repair status reporting system under which the Bureau of Motor Equipment continuously monitored actual performance

to optimize manpower use and reduce vehicle waiting time for repairs. After the pilot in Brooklyn North proved successful, the DS expanded it to cover other parts of the city. By the end of 1971, the Bureau of Motor Equipment had been able to appreciably reduce the time required for major repairs. For example, under the new standards, the task of disassembling, cleaning, and reassembling an International 501 engine required twenty-seven hours instead of fifty-eight. The time required for replacing the engine, clutch, and transmission of a mechanical street sweeper went down from forty to twenty hours. In June 1972, the DS achieved its goal of 15 percent downtime for collection trucks. Only two years before, more than 30 percent of trucks were not operating.²⁹

Kretchmer and Elish also emphasized everyday sanitation service delivery and established biweekly and other report systems to measure missed collections and insufficient street cleaning, and to identify the reasons behind these shortcomings. Kretchmer and Elish benefitted from the Lindsay administration's insistence on including productivity clauses in its new contracts with the USA, meaning that sanitation workers received raises if their union accepted changes in work rules and promised higher productivity. DeLury realized that he could no longer defend the right of sanitation workers not to work and accepted most of these efficiency clauses, given that the city administration was ready to hire private contractors if the situation did not change. In 1970, Deputy Mayor Timothy W. Costello released a report that argued that the DS's monopoly over residential garbage collection generated too many inefficiencies and that private carters could perform three times as many tasks as the DS each day. This report was released at a time when the performance of the DS was actually improving, making the city administration adopt a wait-and-see approach. In terms of improvements, from June 14 to 27, 1971, the DS missed 0.3 percent of collections as opposed to 17.4 percent in the previous year. Missed mechanical street-sweeping routes on alternate side parking streets were 7.6 percent; a year before, they stood at 15.9 percent. Calls for bulk removal were serviced within three days; in 1971, bulk items were not removed before 17 days. The DS towed away 3,183 abandoned cars, 8 percent more than the year before, and the average backlog was 383 vehicles rather than 1,166. The DS received 2,900 complaints rather than 9,500 the year before and issued 43,878 summonses as opposed to 6,830 in the previous year. Productivity continued to slowly improve, although it never reached optimal levels.³⁰

During Lindsay's second term as mayor, many cleanup campaigns in low-income neighborhoods were incorporated in programs from the state and federal governments. This solved some budget dilemmas that the city administration was facing. The state programs, which were limited, included emergency solid waste collection and disposal from areas where unsanitary conditions threatened health and safety standards. For example, in 1971, the state government paid for contracts to clean vacant lots, alleyways, backyards, and rooftops and to exterminate rodents in 186 blocks located in the South Bronx and Harlem. The federal government programs, which were quite expansive, fell under the rubric of the Model Cities program. Passed by the U.S. Congress in 1966, Model Cities was a Lyndon B. Johnson administration program that sought to improve conditions and generate rebuilding in low-income areas. The Lindsay administration, against all odds, was successful in convincing the federal government to designate three Model Cities areas in New York City: Harlem–East Harlem, the South Bronx, and Central Brooklyn. A major part of the New York City Model Cities program included cleanup provisions that the DS had been unable to perform. In 1969, the community planning boards of Harlem–East Harlem and the South Bronx drafted and approved plans that gave control of Model Cities to local organizations and excluded city agencies. The Lindsay administration revised these plans, taking over Model Cities in these areas. The Central Brooklyn community planning boards drafted and approved plans that gave the city administration control. In all cases, local activists who wanted complete community control argued that city agencies such as the DS had not been responsive to

their problems and that there was no evidence that this situation was going to change because of Model Cities. In 1969–1970, these activists were right. In Harlem–East Harlem and the South Bronx, Model Cities programs were delayed because the city government could not agree with community organizations. In Central Brooklyn, they were delayed because city agencies were unable to respond.³¹

The sanitation component of the Model Cities program began to be implemented successfully in New York City in the second half of 1970; Kretchmer was instrumental in ironing out details that had delayed several initiatives. In 1969, the city government hired community service aides to clean lots, yards, and sidewalks. The USA, however, opposed the use of DS equipment by Model Cities aides. In September of that year, Lindsay came to an agreement with DeLury regarding Model Cities; Lindsay promised to hire more sanitation workers and allowed many DS workers to participate in Model Cities areas and receive overtime compensation. In 1970, Kretchmer became the person in charge of appeasing the USA, responding to community demands, and satisfying legal inquiries from the federal government concerning the Model Cities sanitation program. By the summer of 1971, many of the sanitation initiatives of the Model Cities program were well underway. These included the education of community aides, initial cleanups, sidewalk sweeping, alternate side parking compliance, pest extermination, and the cleaning of vacant lots and backyards.³²

Despite many successes, the Model Cities program of New York City showed the extent to which the city government was unable to hold its own. Without Model Cities funds, needed cleanups in most minority neighborhoods would have not taken place. Moreover, when the Lindsay administration faced a shortage of operating funds in 1971, it considered the use of Model Cities money for routine municipal services in Model Cities neighborhoods. Model Cities legislation, however, barred municipalities from using the funds to pay for services that were previously financed with tax levies, such as police protection and garbage collection. Even aspects of the existing Model Cities sanitation program were legally questionable. The city government justified its use of Model Cities community aides for sanitation, policing, and firefighting services as training programs. Participants would be offered the opportunity to join respective city agencies on completion of their training and successful performance in civil service examinations. Although this justification satisfied Model Cities provisions of creating employment opportunities for low-income residents, the courts eventually disagreed with aspects of the practice. Public employee unions from the police and fire departments challenged the city's provision that these new recruits were required to be living in Model Cities areas, since residency requirements for public employee positions had been abolished. In 1973, the courts invalidated the results of examinations taken by Model Cities community aides.³³

Despite the additional assistance of the state and federal programs and increased efficiency by sanitation workers, the maldistribution of sanitation services continued during Lindsay's second term. Residents of low-income neighborhoods saw improved sanitation provision, although many of their vacant lots, backyards, and streets remained dirty. And if these deficiencies persisted at a time when the mayor and his deputies were sympathetic to the plight of minority neighborhoods, one could only imagine what would happen under a different administration.

While Lindsay was hailing his administration as a pioneer in productivity, in 1972, the Citizens Budget Commission released a study that criticized the DS for inefficiencies. The commission argued that despite improvements, private carting companies were still more efficient than the DS, and they estimated that the city administration would save between \$59 and \$77 million annually by contracting garbage collection to private carters. The commission encouraged the city government to start such collections in neighborhoods with one- and two-family homes on an experimental basis. The commission's conclusions were disturbing. After so many reforms, productivity and efficiency within the DS were still inadequate.³⁴

Conclusion

When Lindsay assumed the mayor's office, he did not realize the extent to which the DS as an organization responsible for citywide service delivery had broken down. He assumed that decent sanitation service in low-income neighborhoods was a matter of redirecting DS resources. He ended up having to rebuild the DS almost in its entirety, rather than just redistributing services. Although Lindsay received a disorganized DS from the previous city administration, he was blamed for poor performance and the inability of the DS to perform basic tasks.

While most New Yorkers believed that sanitation provision was inadequate during the post-war period, their perceptions of poor sanitation service depended on race, class, and geography. Everyone took garbage disposal for granted, even though it caused significant environmental problems, it frequently interfered with garbage collection, and its deficiencies threatened to destroy New York's entire solid waste management system. Middle- and upper-income residents also took garbage collection for granted, usually because they received decent collection service. Instead, they complained about unsatisfactory street cleaning. In contrast, low-income residents complained about unacceptable levels of garbage collection, because there was no point in complaining about dirty streets if garbage remained uncollected. All of these groups of people were generally dissatisfied with sanitation enforcement, although middle- and upper-income groups wanted enforcement against littering violations, as opposed to low-income groups, who wanted enforcement against indifferent landlords, bulk dumpers, and vacant-lot owners. The level of sanitation also varied in terms of geography, although to a great extent race and class defined that geography. Manhattan enjoyed better sanitation provision than the other boroughs. Manhattan south of 96th Street did markedly better than Manhattan north of 96th Street. White neighborhoods in the outer boroughs received better sanitation services when compared to African American and Latino neighborhoods. Such patterns of uneven distribution came to be expected. What eventually became unbearable was not just inequality but also the degree of service deterioration.³⁵

The DS, which was rebuilt in the years that followed World War II, began to fall apart in the late 1950s. After his first term, Mayor Wagner focused on matters other than municipal service delivery. Although there were some budget cutbacks in the late 1950s and early 1960s, there were two other major problems that affected the performance of the DS: the department was operating under an antiquated structure that dated back to 1950–1951, and sanitation officials adopted a defensive posture of dismissing complaints about service delivery. For example, in 1961, the City Club of New York conducted a study that found the engineering methods and standards of the DS to be obsolete, the deployment of the workforce to be improper, and the garbage collection methods to be unacceptable. Paul R. Screvane, who had just been elevated from sanitation commissioner to deputy mayor, characterized the study as the “greatest example of stupidity I have ever heard.”³⁶ Since the mid-1950s, poor sanitation conditions were increasingly blamed on public irresponsibility rather than inadequate service delivery, and sanitation officials believed that enforcement would make for a cleaner city. This would be true if sanitation service was sufficient. The problem was that service was not always adequate, and there were many inefficiencies built in the sanitation system that were taken for granted. Gradually, the enforcement of the sanitation code meant additional revenues and a pretense that the city government actively worked toward combating the problem.³⁷

During the Wagner years, the USA emerged as one of the most powerful organizations in the city. DeLury, who headed the USA, embraced the reversal of the hostile attitude toward public employee unions in City Hall when Wagner began to recognize the unions of municipal employees for collective-bargaining and grievance procedures. The USA was the first public employee union to sign an agreement with the city government in 1958. DeLury exerted so much influence in City Hall that in 1960, Wagner transferred sanitation workers who openly opposed DeLury to jobs located in the outer reaches of the outer boroughs so that they could be out of the way.³⁸

By the early 1960s, the city government and the USA had developed an informal relationship that was as follows. Sanitation workers no longer engaged in unauthorized labor actions and avoided the public condemnation of Wagner. In return, the city administration offered sanitation workers decent pay raises and made their retirement benefits on par with those of police officers and firefighters. The city administration also eliminated the “death gamble” for most public employees, meaning that if a sanitation worker died before retirement, his or her dependents received the retirement benefits. Perhaps more importantly, the city government avoided the badly needed reorganization of the DS so that productivity could increase. Administration officials also looked the other way whenever sanitation workers avoided their assigned tasks.³⁹

After the failures of East New York and the South Bronx, the Lindsay administration sought to change the inefficiencies of the DS. The city government started to modernize the aging equipment of the DS by purchasing new sanitation trucks, mechanical street sweepers, and snowplows. At the same time, Lindsay consolidated various maintenance shops in a new Central Repair Shop in Queens. When it became clear that the DS mechanics of the Central Repair Shop and other garages were performing poorly and that a large portion of the new DS fleet was in the shops for repair, the city administration took initiatives that improved productivity and punished nonperforming mechanics. A year after the bitter 1968 strike by sanitation employees, Lindsay also took steps to make peace with the labor union and convince its leadership to become less defiant and more responsive. In the 1970s, Lindsay hired Jerome Kretchmer to become his EPA commissioner and Herbert Elish to become his sanitation commissioner; both of them continued to collaborate with the USA and established report systems that sought to identify areas in which the DS showed weakness so that they could be remedied. Finally, Lindsay managed to receive generous funding from the federal government for his expansive Model Cities program, and a portion of this money was used for sanitation provision in low-income neighborhoods.

Although Lindsay’s sanitation improvements were not lasting because of the fiscal crisis that crippled municipal services between 1975 and 1981, his outlook toward an efficient, responsive, and equitable service delivery reemerged in the 1980s. As the rebuilding of city agencies took place, the inefficiency and maldistribution of basic municipal services became increasingly a thing of the past. What occurred in the 1960s may appear as an exercise in vanity, but Lindsay’s fight to modernize the Department of Sanitation was influential because he showed that improvements were possible and that the existing state of affairs was unacceptable.

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