Albany’s “Room Where It Happens” --- Audacious Need Not Apply

(with a nod to Lin-Manuel Miranda, composer of “Hamilton”)

About a month ago, this Commentary page reassured Albany that although reinventing policing is an enormous undertaking, the city is up to the task. We actually said, “We got this, Albany!” Developments over the last few weeks have shaken our confidence.

City government appears determined to sap the very passion out of what began as a bold attempt to rid policing of systemic racism through a community-driven, collaborative process. Despite Governor Cuomo’s directive to “involve the entire community in the discussion,” some key advocates are missing from the City’s Policing Reform and Reinvention Collaborative --- Albany’s “Room Where It Happens.”

Nearly half of the City-appointed Collaborative’s 37 members are current or former government employees, many of them mandated by the Governor’s directive. The remainder are legal authorities, academics, members of advisory boards, clergy, and other community advocates. The Center appreciates and respects these civic-minded people who are giving of their time and energy to make Albany a better place to live.

But why is Black Lives Matter missing from the Collaborative? Why is Citizen Action missing from the Collaborative? Why is the Civil Liberties Union missing from the Collaborative? Why is the NAACP missing from the Collaborative? Why is the Center for Law and Justice missing from the Collaborative? Why are disillusioned former ACPAC members missing from the Collaborative? Why are the critical Op Ed and letter writers missing from the Collaborative?

Glaringly omitted are some who have raised their voices in anger at the maiming and killing of Albany Blacks by Albany Police. Yes, anger. There is evidently no room for the angry in the Room Where It Happens. Indeed, Collaborative members were schooled at their very first meeting to frame their comments as polite dialogue rather than provocative debate. Yet, Governor Cuomo’s Executive Order emphasizes the need for bold, transformative change, acknowledging the incontrovertible underpinnings of the righteous anger of the people:

“WHEREAS, there is a long and painful history in New York State of discrimination and mistreatment of black and African-American citizens dating back to the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in America; and

WHEREAS, this recent history includes a number of incidents involving the police that have resulted in the deaths of unarmed civilians, predominantly black and African-American men, that have undermined the public’s confidence and trust in our system of law enforcement and criminal justice, and such condition is ongoing and urgently needs to be rectified; and

WHEREAS, these deaths in New York State include those of Anthony Baez, Amadou Diallo, Ousmane Zango, Sean Bell, Ramarley Graham, Patrick Dorismond, Akai Gurley, and Eric Garner, amongst others, and, in other states, include Oscar Grant, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Laquan McDonald, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, Philando Castile, Antwon Rose Jr., Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, amongst others,”
Albany can add to the list the angering deaths of Jesse Davis and Dontay Ivy. The community is angry about Ellazar Williams, shot in the back and paralyzed from the chest down by an Albany Police Officer who faced neither criminal charges nor disciplinary measures. Anger is not a four-letter word. Anger is an appropriate response to injustice. Anger should not be sanitized out of the Collaborative.

Many people who filled city streets in Minneapolis and Boston and Los Angeles and Chicago and New York after George Floyd’s murder were angry. Many who protested in Albany were, and remain, angry. The Collaborative needs to appreciate the anger to reinvent a policing plan that openly discloses all that is wrong with Albany policing and corrects it.

Is the Center excluded from the Room Where It Happens because we have had the audacity to criticize Albany policing, at times angrily? With another nod to Lin-Manuel Miranda,

“I gotta holler just to be heard.”

President Barack Obama, who taught us all about the audacity of hope, thanked protesters in the streets across the nation following the death of George Floyd, urging young African Americans to "feel hopeful even as you may feel angry." In her address to the Class of 2020, Michelle Obama said:

So, don’t ever, ever let anyone tell you that you’re too angry, or that you “should keep your mouth shut.” There will always be those who want to keep you silent, to have you be seen but not heard, or maybe they don’t even want to see you at all. But those people don’t know your story, and if you listen to them, then nothing will ever change. So, it’s up to you to speak up when you or someone you know isn’t being heard. It’s up to you to speak out against cruelty, dishonesty, bigotry — all of it.

No doubt the City will dismiss complaints of exclusion, citing future opportunities for comment. But that’s not at all as empowering as being in the Room Where It Happens, and it’s not what Governor Cuomo mandated. The Governor reminded mayors and police chiefs in his August 17th letter that the entire community must be involved in the discussion that produces the plan. Not some of the community --- the entire community. “Entire” includes those who are angry.

Fortunately, Governor Cuomo anticipated Collaboratives excluding certain segments of the community. His Executive Order mandates that the Collaborative’s plan be offered for public comment before it is voted on by the Common Council. And that will be our opportunity, Albany, for all of us justifiably angry people to have a shot at ensuring our City’s plan truly reinvents policing in Albany. And if the Council-approved plan doesn’t meet the Executive Order’s mandates, we’ll make that known to the Governor and the State Director of the Budget as they consider APD’s funding for 2021.

When you exclude the audacious from the Room Where It Happens, don’t be surprised when they raise their voices elsewhere. With a final nod to Lin-Manuel Miranda,

“This is not a moment, it’s the movement!”

REST ASSURED, ALBANY --- WE’RE NOT THROWIN’ AWAY OUR SHOT!

Next Week’s Commentary: The Racial Bias Audit of the Albany Police Department