

Are liberal hopes for New York Mayor Bill de Blasio too high? (+video)

New York Mayor Bill de Blasio took office Wednesday with soaring promises and sky-high expectations among liberals. But such hopes often prove hard to fulfill.

By [Harry Bruinius, Staff writer](#) January 2, 2014



New York — For New York Mayor [Bill de Blasio](#), the actual, nitty-gritty “tale of two cities” has finally begun.

After months of proclaiming his lofty liberal vision, vowing to transfer more of the city’s wealth to the economic needs of the poor, Mayor de Blasio finally took the reins of nation’s largest municipal bureaucracy, vowing Wednesday in his inaugural speech to make the city “a more progressive place” as quickly as possible.

Everything about the address exuded his eagerness for the task, highlighted in the leitmotif: “We won’t wait, we’ll do it now.”

Still, as de Blasio and the city’s other newly elected leaders proclaimed liberal messages dormant for decades on the inaugural stage, storm clouds seemed to be looming.

Some are of the literal kind. For a man who has just jumped from running the small public advocate’s office, with a \$2 million budget and no power in running city services, to leading a sprawling municipal system with a \$70 billion budget and almost 500,000 city workers,

Thursday's snow storm is no small thing. It's the sort of unexpected municipal challenge that has sunk many a big city mayor in the past.

"This will be first test, and he's got to pull it off as close to flawlessly as he can," **Douglas Muzzio, a professor at Baruch College at the City University of New York**, told Reuters Thursday. "He's got to send the message, 'I can run this joint.' "

Well after the storm passes, however, the challenge of running "this joint" will only grow. Call it the "Obama effect": Liberal leader takes control of an administration to much fanfare after years of Republican rule. Rhetoric soars, expectations mount – and then the business of actually governing begins.

“Lofty goals and high expectations – that’s usually a recipe for disaster,” says Jeanne Zaino, professor of political campaign management at New York University’s School of Continuing and Professional Studies. “Beyond, say, the snowstorm, I think he faces enormous challenges just in the day-to-day operations of a city with 8 million people.”

“He’s also got a budget he’s got to put forward, union contracts to negotiate – and however he’s able to slice these up, it will never be what his supporters are looking for.”

Take his promise to end economic inequality. It runs the risk of eventually angering his now-jubilant supporters.

“De Blasio may quickly find himself in the position of telling people he agrees with to slow down,” says Ken Sherrill, professor emeritus of political science at Hunter College in Manhattan, “that the things that they wanted to do are going to occur more slowly, or not on the scale that was envisioned, because it's hard to come up with the resources of doing it.”

“I think things are going to be more incremental, grand plans are going to take a while to implement,” he adds.

Though de Blasio has been criticized for the slow pace in which he has hired city managers, many observers say he is making up for his own managerial inexperience by hiring those with a lot.

“Look at the two big ones, the police commissioner [Bill Bratton] and and the schools’ chancellor [Carmen Fariña],” says Ms. Zaino, who also teaches political science at Iona College in New Rochelle, N.Y. “Whether you like them or not, these are people who understand how these departments operate, they understand how to manage them. So whether you agree with the direction or not, he’s got people there who know what to do.”

“But how he is going to achieve his ultimate goal, I think that is the big question,” Zaino adds. “Not only for him, but also so many of these progressive mayors in big cities across the country who have made similar promises: Can they in fact achieve what they're setting out to do?”

For now, de Blasio doesn't seem to be shying away from the hype.

"When I said we would take dead aim at the tale of two cities, I meant it. And we will do it," he said to a crowd of about 5,000 bundled people Wednesday in front of City Hall. "That mission – our march towards a fairer, more just, more progressive place, our march to keep the promise of New York alive for the next generation – it begins today."

He promised to expand the city's paid sick-leave law. He said he would force developers to build affordable housing, and that he would expand health centers for communities in need. He emphasized again the need to reform stop-and-frisk, an antiterror policy that gives city police wide latitude in who they can frisk. And he spent the heart of his speech talking about his plan to raise taxes on the wealthy for universal pre-kindergarten and expanded after-school programs.

"Those earning between \$500,000 and \$1 million a year, for instance, would see their taxes increase by an average of \$973 a year," the mayor said. "That's less than three bucks a day – about the cost of a small soy latte at your local Starbucks."

In their inaugural speeches, de Blasio's predecessors, [Rudolph Giuliani](#) and [Michael Bloomberg](#), focused more on nuts-and-bolts matters, promising clean and safe city streets for residents and tourists – and more than that, promised to create a city friendly to the interests of business and commerce.

Mr. Giuliani then went on to turn a dangerous and graffiti-covered subway system into one more safe and on time. He also transformed Times Square from a free-wheeling red light district into a strictly-zoned mecca for glitzy capitalism. Bloomberg, too, focused on balanced budgets and making the city "safe, strong, open for business and ready to lead the world into the 21st century." His expanded public spaces, revamped waterfronts, and paved the way for multibillion dollar office and residential high rises – making the city a "luxury brand" for the world's most successful workers in high tech and finance.

Wednesday's ceremony, however, was in many ways a full-throated repudiation of the past two administrations, with a young poet contrasting "brownstones and brown skin playing tug-of-war" and a pastor referring to "the plantation called New York."

And the new public advocate replacing de Blasio railed against the Bloomberg years, promising to support a voiceless poor. "The policies that make them voiceless must give way to a government that works for them, that speaks for them, that cares more about a child going hungry than a new stadium or a new tax credit for a luxury development," she said.

De Blasio's voice, for one, was heard Wednesday. Getting his government to work for those he vowed to protect is now the task at hand.