



CBC's 2023 Annual Gala Award

Felix Rohatyn Award Presentation to Honoree Stephen Berger

Transcript

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Andrew Rein:

Well, what an honor to have Comptroller Lander and Attorney General Letitia James here tonight. Thank you very much for those words. Now we turn to the Rohatyn Award and one of the great pleasures of my job, and this is as you anybody who knows me, is this is so sincere. One of the great pleasures is to honor those whose public service has helped New York survive and thrive to this day. We all owe them a great debt of gratitude and CBC's Row in an award does this so well. So it's my honor to be part of this in, in honoring Steve Berger tonight. And to start us off, we're fortunate to have Nick Rohatyn, CBC Trustee, CEO of the Rohatyn Group, and importantly Felix's son to kick us off. Nick, take it away.

Nicolas Rohatyn:

Thank you, Andrew. And greetings everyone, and thank you all for, for being here. My dad was a longtime trustee and strong supporter of the CBC. He would've been extremely proud to see that throughout these turbulent times, the CBC continues to forcefully speak the fiscal truth and provide concrete guidance to the city and state. I'm delighted to introduce the award named after him. The award is presented to a notable individual whose commitment and achievements are reminiscent of my dad's. Its past recipients are indeed distinguished in so many ways. Stan Fisher, Stan Schumann, Dick Ravitch, who is here, Aire Townsend, who is here and last year's honoree. Gene Keilin, who will follow me this year's awardee Steve Berger, or as he was referred to by my dad as the Hasidic Humphrey Bogart. And if you knew my dad and how many times he had seen the movie Casablanca, you would understand what a great compliment that was.

Steve is a logical and fitting member of the group, given his enormous list of accomplishments and in particular his service during the fiscal crisis, along with dad, who was so fond and had so much respect for Steve. The fiscal crisis, of course, brought a diverse group of folks together, politicians, bankers and union leaders amongst others in a real pressure cooker of a situation. My brother, unbeknownst to all of you, has been working on a documentary in a fiscal crisis and in



so doing had the chance to interview Steve and among other things, they talked about his multi-dimensional career. I love this one quote, which I think captured Steve in so many dimensions. Smart, insightful, quick, and a bit of irreverent with some life lessons. I wish I had heard 20 or 30 years. And so I quote Steve, I did a lot. The rule was you got to understand the rules. I grew up on the lower East side. You got two or three rules, okay? Number one is you don't take shit from assholes. Second is you get out of town before the sheriff knows you're there. So you keep changing careers and there you have it, but great advice indeed. And now over to Gene to pass the torch of this award to Steve.

Eugene Keilin:

Thank you, Nick, and thank you to your family for supporting this award named for and patterned after your father. If there's a photo in your program of Steve Berger and I as much younger men. If he's the one who looks like Hasidic Humphrey Bogart, I'm the one who looks like Robert Redford. In 1975, when New York City went broke, one New Yorker who was not surprised was Steve Berger. In January of 1972, Steve had become executive director of the Scott Commission, a bipartisan group, which governor Nelson Rockefeller asked to assess the management of New York City by its Mayor John Lindsey. About a year later, the Scott Commission issued a detailed and substantive report. The report said 1973 or so, New York City was a financial mess and headed for very rough water. A condition vigorously disputed by the mayor and not widely shared. Steve Berger was responsible for that conclusion. When Lindsay left office, Abe Beam didn't fix the mess and the spit really did hit the fan. Not surprisingly, Steve Berger became Executive Director of the Financial Control Board, created by the State to push and prod, and if necessary, forced the City back to solvency.

As Steve will tell you in a few minutes, the job got done and has been durable and the solution that was found in those days works today. Thank you. Steve's time at the center of the fiscal crisis storm would've been enough public service for most people, but he was just getting started. In 1979, he became Chair of the MTA Finance Committee, a job that never produces good news. In 1980, the President named him chair of the United States Railway Association, essentially the receiver in bankruptcy for the freight railroads of the East Coast. In 1970, in 1985, he became the Executive Director of the Port Authority. Another job with many masters. More recently, he was the Berger who chaired the Burger Commission on healthcare in the 21st century and the Health System Redesign Group, which created a roadmap for healthcare in Brooklyn. The Rohatyn Award recognizes lifetime achievement in public service. It's hard to imagine a lifetime with more achievement than Steve's. He served Democrats and Republicans



with skill and candor when really hard jobs had to be done Steve did them, and did them well. He understands politics. But like Felix, he has always been farsighted and committed to finding the right answer

From the Scott Commission to the Berger Commission, he told people what they needed to hear. He has a reputation as a budget cutter, but he really is a builder. Steve Berger could have had this award last year, but he deferred to me. Just as well, this way I get to make the presentation. It's always a privilege to present this award, but it's a special pleasure, a unique pleasure to present it to my colleague, my collaborator, and my friend of 40 years. Steve Berger.

Stephen Berger:

Thank you Gene. Thank you, Nick. You know, it adds to the honor of receiving this award to be introduced by a colleague, a dear friend, a friend who has shared so many of the past decades with me and whose career was honored by CBC last year. In accepting this award, I do so on behalf of many people, a few of whom are here today, and many who are no longer with us, who contributed to my life in public service, whether at the Scott Commission the Control Board, the Department of Social Services, the MTA, the Port Authority, and the Health Commission. The achievements of each of those challenges was the product of many people working together to make the city and the state better places to live for the people of New York. The award is named for Felix, and so I'm going to concentrate on the city, the Scott Commission and primarily the Control Board.

50 years ago the, the, by the way, decades go easy for me at this point, 50 years ago when the city had actually run out of money, effectively falling into undeclared bankruptcy, an incredible team of people from the public and the private sectors came together. I'm going to name many of them and many in this room have never heard of them, but for me, they are here today sharing this award. I think of labor leaders like Victor Gotbaum and Barry Feinstein and Al Shanker and Bill Scott, and the irrepressible Jack Beagle. Those of you who never met him, boy you've lost a lot. Public officials like Sid Schwartz and John Zuccotti and Ken Axelson. Legislative leaders like Stanley Steingut and Al Blumenthal. Businessmen of course like Felix, like Stan Schumann, like Dick Ravitch, who is here tonight, Bill Ellinghouse and other members of the Control Board. The Bankers, David Rockefeller and Walter Reston, John McGillicuddy and Charlie Sanford, who in those days headed what were New York and not global banks and for whom the city's survival was as important as protecting their bond portfolios. The public and private figures who came together, debating, arguing, but committed to craft a lasting financial



and governance infrastructure to save New York City. They all deserve to be remembered today, all of them and most of all the optimist, and the magician from Brooklyn, Governor Hugh L. Carey.

In the same vein, we should celebrate the CBC, which for 90 years has been a watchdog with a critical but a positive eye watching over all of us, on behalf of the people of New York. I think of Ray Horton and Chuck Brecher and Diana Fortuna and Carol Kellerman and Andrew [Rein]. Their mission is to keep us on a virtuous path. The city's operating system we rebuilt has lasted for 50 years, copied by many other locations and has provided the city leadership a framework with the never-ending fiscal and policy crisis, which are constantly erupting. When we came together 50 years ago at the control board, we faced a history of politicians whose greatest skill was forever kicking the can down the road, leaving a mess for those who would follow. But 50 years ago, the can had gotten too heavy and the road too short for that to work. So together we designed a rescue and built a fiscal infrastructure that was transparent and functional and still lives. On a personal note, it was the city's fiscal crisis, which brought me together with my wife Cynthia Wainwright. She was part of a small group put together by Carey at the bleakest moment of the fiscal crisis, representing an agency I knew nothing about and had to be taught, the Department of Corrections. And she has educated and supported me for five decades and those of you who know me know how heroic she really is had to be.

Saint Augustine spoke of three presents, the present of the past, the present of the present, and the present of the future. We are here in the present of the present, celebrating the present of the past, having learned from it for decades. But there are once again challenges and difficult times confronting us. As Walter Harris recently put it to me, we are once again on the precipice and our responsibility is to use what we know to serve the present of the future, the present of our children, and of our grandchildren. It is this generation's turn governors, mayors, and legislators to make difficult decisions that we did 50 years ago and leave their legacy for the future. I would like to particularly applaud our governor, who is establishing two commissions in an area that I care a great deal about: healthcare redesign and the aging, both require infrastructure, repairs and serious overhaul, as long overdue. As I look at this incredible audience, I know that in this room are tomorrow's award recipients and I can only wish them Godspeed and the fortitude to deal with today's problems. Thank you all very much. Goodnight.

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