

John Marchi, an Italian American Class Act

Jerry Krase (April 28, 2009)



John Marchi passed away last Saturday. In my opinion, he was among the best and the brightest and he deserves a place alongside New York City's other unblemished political heroes such as Fiorello LaGuardia and Mario Cuomo. He left us at a time when positive political role models for Italians, Italian Americans, and those who want to be, are becoming scarce. History repeats and our time is another one during which too many elected representatives are being exposed as disgraces of one sort or another. Even in the heat of battle, John Marchi demonstrated that the connection between disgrace and politics is not a given, and on the contrary that the connection between grace and Italianita is.

Staten Island born and raised, John J. Marchi, died last Saturday, April 25th, 2009 while visiting his family's ancestral hometown of Lucca, Italy. He was 87 and his life is a great example of how places mold people. Lucca is surrounded by imposing walls built to defend itself against an "old enemy" (Florence), and Staten Island is essentially surrounded by a moat that separates it from its historical nemesis "New York City." Win or lose, John Marchi only defended things he felt were worth the effort.

As a New York State Senator for 50 years (1956 to 2006) Marchi fought in Albany (and at New York City Hall or Washington DC) for the interests of Staten Islanders such as the preservation and



expansion of Richmond County's (Staten Island's) cultural and educational institutions. One of his greatest gifts to his fellow Islanders was the creation of the College of Staten Island as part of The City University of New York. Another of his battles fought and won was the closing of the Fresh Kills Landfill that at one time was the largest in the world. For half a century it was a major repository for New York City's garbage, and Islander resentment. Taking his cue from the people of Lucca, he was also a fierce defender, and promoter, of the best of Italian culture. There was not a worthy Italian or Italian American cultural project that didn't have John Marchi's imprimatur on it.

Some (too) many years ago I was invited with a small group of other "young" Italian American (in my case half Sicilian American) activists to meet with Senator Marchi at his home in Staten Island. I assumed it would not be a meeting of the minds, as he held more or less "conservative" positions on most issues and I was off the scale in the opposite direction. He opposed abortion and supported American involvement in the Vietnam War. I supported a woman's right to choose and participated in more than one antiwar demonstration that he regarded as strikes "against America."

As I recall, the meeting was the most cordial I had ever had with someone with whom I had so little in common. However, what we shared was large enough to cover all bases -- our common concern for the welfare of the Italian American population of New York City. I saw him off and on over the decades and always felt compelled to go over to him and re-introduce myself; "Senator Marchi, we have met before. My name is Jerry Krase." And he would always politely say "I know. How are you Jerry?" and act as though we were good friends. For the last two years our ever briefer encounters were at the Wagner College DaVinci Society Scholarship Dinners at the Staten Island Garden Inn. There I would ask his daughter Joan to re-introduce me to her dad and he, of course, would renew our old acquaintance.

John Marchi's gentlemanliness must be something his family brought over to Staten Island from Italy as charm and sophistication is hardly something that easily follows the words "Staten Island" today. In contrast to the dangerous currents that run under the Verrazano Bridge and the pollution lurking under the Goethals, Bayonne, and Outerbridge Crossing bridges, the imposing wall surrounding Lucca is hardly a fearsome barrier. It is actually a lovely elevated park; perfect for lovers. Contained within these walls is a delightful maze of small and even smaller streets leading to people and piazzas of various sizes and characters all of which have something pleasantly "special" to offer. Getting lost in Lucca can be exhilarating. Getting lost in Staten Island can give you a headache. Staten Island has a long way to go before it meets the Marchi standard, but if it ever gets there, he will have deserved most of the credit.

I have cut and pasted here a piece of a book, *The Staten Island Italian American Experience* (www.wagner.edu/institutional_advancement/book [2]) that I wrote for the DaVinci Society of Wagner College. Some notes about him can be found in the chapter entitled "The Rise of Italian Politicians and Voters".

Despite the success of many, the persistence of anti-Italian bias in the city politics was clearly demonstrated in the mayoral election of 1969. In the following excerpt from Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan's near classic study of New York City ethnic politics they expound of such prejudice at an incredibly high, academic, level: "Significantly, by the way of illustration, he (Michael Lerner) cited a world-famous Yale professor of government who, at dinner, "on the day an Italian American announced his candidacy for Mayor of New York," remarked that "If Italians aren't actually an inferior race, they do the best imitation of one I've seen." It was also said of Mario Procaccino that he was so sure of being elected that he had ordered new linoleum for Gracie Mansion. No one said much of anything about John Marchi, the Republican and Conservative candidate whose Tuscan aristocratic style was surely the equal of Linday's WASP patrician manner, and who conducted perhaps the most thoughtful campaign of the three. Procaccino was made out the clod, and was beaten." (Beyond the Melting Pot, 1970: lxxiii-xiv)

In the same text, Glazer and Moynihan's, few, yet prescient comments about stable Italian neighborhoods and politics clearly establish Staten Island as the future for Italo-American New Yorkers. "The North Bronx Italian sections developed (as did similar areas in Queens) when Italians went to the end of the subway lines and beyond, seeking cheap land on which to build houses and raise vegetables and goats. The sections are still heavily Italians, and helped elect Representative



Paul Fino from the Bronx. Staten Island, which was also attractive to Italians forty years ago because it offered a semi rural life, remains heavily Italians. It was the first borough to have an Italian borough president.” (187) What Glazer and Moynihan had no inkling of was the between 1934 and 2006 Italian Americans held the position of Staten Island Borough President for more than three-quarters of the time representing the Conservative, Democrat, and Republican Parties. The following list is impressive: Joseph A. Palma 1934-45, Albert V. Maniscalco 1955-65, , Anthony R. Gaeta 1977-84, Ralph J. Lamberti 1984-89, Guy V. Molinari 1990-2001, and James P. Molinaro 2002-present.

It is true that Italian Americans from New York City have been successful at many levels of politics. In addition to those already mentioned the additional short list would include Governor Mario V. Cuomo, Vice Presidential Candidate Geraldine Ferraro, New York City Comptroller Mario Procaccino, New York State Senator John Calandra, New York State Supreme Court Justices Anthony Travia, Michael Pesci, and even County Leaders such as one-time Brooklyn “Boss” Meade Esposito. It is in Staten Island however that Italian Americans have shown real political muscle. In the year 2006 Italian Americans held the vast majority of the available elective positions for the borough, again representing all major parties:

- United States Congressional Representative, Republican Vito Fosella
- Staten Island Borough President, Conservative/Republican James Molinaro
- New York State Assemblyman, Republican Vincent Ignizio
- New York State Senate Senators, Republican John Marchi, and Democrats Diane Savino and Vincent Gentile
- New York City Councilmen, Republicans James Oddo and Andrew Lanza
- Other Staten Island Italian Americans serve in the elective and appointive judicial systems such as Thomas P. Aliotta, Justice of the New York State Supreme Court, and Eric Vitaliano, United States District Judge for the Eastern District of New York.

For some, like the Molinaris, politics is almost the family business. It began with Italian-born Democratic Party Assemblyman S. Robert Molinari of New Dorp who served briefly in the New York State Assembly (1943-44). His son, Guy Victor Molinari also served in the New York State Assembly, but as a Republican from 1975 to 80 when he ran for an won the post of United States Representative and where he served until 1990. At that point he became Borough President of Staten Island and remained in that capacity until 2001. His position in congress was assumed in 1990 by his daughter Susan Molinari, also a Republican, who was re-elected for four consecutive terms before retiring from office in 1997 to pursue a career as a television journalist.

Because of their almost legendary status, some of Staten Island’s political icons such as John Marchi and Vito J. Titone, require more than passing notice. Senator John J. Marchi has served in the New York State Senate since 1957 and is recognized as the longest serving legislator--at all levels--in America. Marchi was born in Staten Island, attended local schools. In addition to his undergraduate and law degrees he was awarded the degree of Doctor of Laws from Wagner College. He has been a leader in Italian and Italian American affairs for which, in 1968, he received the highest award Italy bestows on a non-resident: Commander of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Italy. Then in 1992 he was given the Filippo Mazzei Award for public service and strengthening relations between the United States and Italy. In 1969 and 1973, he was the candidate of the Republican Party for the Office of Mayor of the City of New York. When the New York City Charter revisions reduced the power of boroughs he led the movement for Staten Island’s secession from New York City.

It is this activity that has enshrined him New York’s political pantheon. As Bill Kaufman wrote: “Staten Island's 400,000 citizens had one last, best hope: independence. In 1993, led by the "George Washington of Staten Island," the scholarly Republican-Conservative State Senator John Marchi, islanders voted two-to-one for freedom. (The Times editorial page rebuked the secessionists for their "passions.") State Assembly Democrats, however, insisted that the secession request had to come from the entire city, not just Staten Island. Meanwhile, Republicans, having just elected Rudy Giuliani thanks to the votes of Staten Islanders, were not all that eager to cut loose the island and its GOP



voters, either. The free Staten Island movement drifted into limbo.”
(www.taemag.com/issues/issueID.143/toc.asp [3])

In my opinion, John Marchi was among the best brightest and he deserves a place alongside New York City's other unblemished political heroes such as Firelo LaGuardia and Mario Cuomo. I'm sure he would agree but would hardly make the claim himself. I offer my deepest sympathies, and gratitude, to his family and his two hometowns.

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