



**Inaugural Address of  
David N. Cicilline  
Mayor**

**Providence, Rhode Island  
January 6, 2003**

---

Three hundred and sixty-seven years ago, a small band of men and women left behind their embattled city, struck out on their own, and created a new community. Guided by principles of fairness and individual liberty that would later find their way into the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, they stood together to resist the social intolerance and government persecution of their time. Out of a wilderness, they built a village. Over the centuries, that village became the vibrant city we love.

Those of us who live and work in Providence feel a grateful connection to our seventeenth century founding fathers and mothers. Indeed, *all* Americans owe them a debt for their visionary contribution to the principles of religious tolerance, free speech, and the right to self-determination. Honored more in the breach than in the observance in 1635, these ideas have since proven themselves among the most powerful forces for change in the history of humankind, capable of moving entire nations toward more humane, equitable and economically successful forms of society.

Today, I ask you to join me in posing and, to the extent we can, answering three questions:

Where do we stand, as a city, at the beginning of a new era in our history?

What are our goals for the coming period?

How shall we achieve those goals, together?

As we consider the future of Providence, three lessons from its origins seem of great importance. I want to draw your attention to them now, and return to them later.

The first lesson from the experience of Roger Williams and his companions is about hope, and defiance of convention. Providence was born, and became the city we know today, because a small group of people dared to envision a society entirely different than the ones they had experienced before. They fought back against a set of forces that they had every reason to believe would prevail. They dared to hope for a better future, when their hope must have felt, at times, like folly. They rejected business as usual. And they refused to allow the prevailing norms and attitudes of the time to define them, to limit what they could first imagine, and then create.

The second lesson from our past is the importance of thinking BIG. What Providence's founders undertook was no modest invention, no mere wrinkle in the course of history. These people were *radicals*. They wanted to create a place in which a genuine diversity of religious and spiritual practices would not only be tolerated, but respected and honored. This was human ambition at its finest. In the words of a great American, Marian Wright Edelman, they chose to "aim high."

The third lesson is that real change comes through collective action, and that most such actions are, in fact, small, daily events. Providence was not founded by a couple of charismatic leaders who performed miracles—it was founded by a group of ordinary people, *including* those leaders, who together did extraordinary things.

In America, we love the heroic individual and his or her triumph. But we often celebrate our leaders in a way that imperils our understanding of history, and of our own times. The heroes of the Providence story were the farmers and fishermen and parents and pilgrims who made it their home. They made the city possible through a thousand small acts of enterprise and perseverance. The big events may get the headlines, even in the history books, but it is our *small, daily* acts that determine our fate.

\*\*\*\*\*

So, let us ask the first question. Where do we stand, as a city, in this first week of the year 2003? What are our strengths? What are the challenges to which we must rise?

First, a look at our assets:

- Providence is young! With a third of our population under the age of 20, we are, in fact, among the youngest cities in New England.
  
- Providence is New England's fastest growing city. We grew in population by 8% in the past decade, mainly through the arrival of new residents in our midst from faraway places around the globe.
  
- Providence is home to outstanding colleges, universities and hospitals—with thousands of employees serving hundreds of thousands of people each year, and generating billions of dollars in annual revenue.
- Providence offers all businesses, large and small, real opportunities for growth. Our well-established downtown is complemented by neighborhoods eager to participate in future economic growth. The City Council, Governor-Elect Carcieri, the members of the state legislature, our federal officials and I are unanimous in our vocal and strong commitment to business and economic development in the city.
  
- Providence is a haven for the arts. We are blessed with a greater proportion and quality of painters, dancers, musicians, sculptors, actors, designers and creative spirits than any other great American city.

- Providence is among the most ethnically diverse cities in the region. We are now a “majority minority” city—meaning that most people living here identify themselves as African American, Asian, Hispanic or Native American.

In Providence, we understand that this di<diversity *is* one of our great strengths. While some of our national political leaders are slow to repudiate the inglorious periods of our nation’s racial history, Providence is fortunate to be moving forward. We *reject* bigotry and intolerance just as our founders did. We *honor* our city’s immigrants because we know that these new members of our community represent our future.

\*\*\*\*\*

With these assets in mind, let us turn our attention to the challenges that confront us.

- Our city’s children are at risk. Two-fifths of our young people—half of our Latino youth—are growing up poor. *A quarter of our families live in poverty.* Despite recent improvements, all but one of the city’s schools ranked as a “low performing school,” and only 13% of the city’s middle and high schools showed improvement in 2001.
- Our neighborhoods are not safe enough. In the last two years our crime rate has been twice the national average.
- Economically, the city and many of our neighborhoods are in trouble. In the mid-nineties, fully half of the city’s remaining manufacturing jobs disappeared, and currently, in many areas of the city, unemployment exceeds 20%. In fact, when adjusted for inflation, median household income actually decreased in Providence by 6% in the past decade.

As a government, we face challenges as well. The economic future of the city is put at grave risk by the city government’s lack of fiscal integrity. Providence has an unfunded pension liability of approximately \$500,000,000. The Rhode Island Public Expenditure

Council projects that the budget shortfall for fiscal year 2004 will be at least \$34,000,000, unless bold action is taken.

We cannot look to state or federal government *alone* to address this problem. The city's financial security, its success in attracting and retaining business and generating new revenue, and its ability to honor existing contract obligations are all at risk. More than this, our capacity to respond to the educational, public safety and community imperatives before us is entirely dependent upon our success in restoring the city's financial health.

We come by this fiscal difficulty through a collective failure of political will. Simply put, Providence has a thirty-year history of refusing to exercise fiscal restraint. Among other things, Providence must re-examine its city personnel systems. No long-term vision for the city that is both honest and fiscally responsible can avoid the recognition that a fundamental restructuring of the city's hiring, compensation, and retirement systems is required.

\*\*\*\*\*

The challenges I have described—fighting for children in poverty, improving our public schools, creating jobs, and even restoring fiscal integrity, are the challenges of America's cities. But you *all* know that we have one more challenge to discuss today—perhaps our most serious one—the ongoing impact of a legacy of corruption and unethical behavior in the leadership of city government. We are all painfully aware of the violations of the public trust that have occurred in City Hall. Over the past three decades, a culture of self-service, insider dealing, and arrogance—established at the very top—has made us cynical about the capacity of city government to behave ethically, let alone to respond to our concerns.

When government is worthy of neither the people it serves, nor the people who work within it, it corrodes the heart of democracy. Cynicism may make for shrewd politics, but it makes for ineffective government and a disengaged citizenry.

\*\*\*\*\*

Let me tell you two small stories:

Shortly after I was elected, I walked out of the Transition office to find a traffic officer preparing a ticket for my car. She looked up, asked if it was my car, and quickly began to remove the ticket from the book, as if to tear it up. I stopped her, pointed out that the car was, in fact, improperly parked, and asked her to finish writing the ticket. She did, but you could tell she was surprised.

Later that same week, I found in my mail a check for a thousand dollars from a city employee, offered as a post-election contribution to my campaign. As many of you know, my refusal to accept donations from city employees was at the heart of my effort to challenge the prevailing system of influence-peddling and patronage. I returned the uncashed check. A few days later I got a call from this same person, inquiring about my actions. What was the problem? People seemed to think that my ban on city employee donations was, quote, “just for the elections.” No, I assured this person. The principle held, as did the practice. My caller was dumbfounded.

I tell you these stories by way of illustration, and to stress that no matter how noble our visions or ambitious our plans, they will come to naught if we do not change the way we do business.

The greatest threat to Providence is that those of us who have endured a generation of cronyism and mediocrity in our public leadership will fail to seize this moment. Supported by decades of precedent, too many of the people consider city government inherently untrustworthy and hostile to change. Worse, because a small but visible fraction of city employees have been involved in corruption and self-dealing, some people believe that many of Providence’s more than 6,000 city employees are similarly unethical.

*This is simply not true.* The vast majority of city workers are hard working, civic-minded people of good will. But their industry and good intentions are often obscured by the sluggishness and unresponsiveness of city offices and bureaucracies mired in old systems that do not work.

What *is* true is that the city's workers are in desperate need of leadership, and opportunities to develop their skills. They have been surviving in a culture of underperformance and resignation. They need leaders who can support, challenge and inspire them to do the level and quality of work the city requires of them.

In a signal that the city's fortunes are changing, the people we are attracting to work in my administration are of national caliber. They are, to a person, deeply committed to leading this process of change.

Because of the shameful recent history of the city's leadership, we owe it to ourselves to consider HOW we will do our work, going forward. In a time of justifiable skepticism about the capacity of the city government to honor its commitments to you, the electorate, it is time to clear the air.

If you, the residents of Providence, are to engage with us in this vital work—as you must if we are to be successful—you have the right to know how we are going to earn your respect. It is our hope, and our duty, to do what we can to heal the breach in the public trust which so jeopardizes our collective future.

*Therefore, today, in the company of my family, my fellow elected officials, and the before the people of Providence, I declare a new approach to city government, grounded in ethics and strong values, and in fact, guided by those old-fashioned principles of right and wrong.*

From this day forward, Providence city government will conduct its affairs in a radically different way. Today, we turn our backs on the practices and customs of the recent past. In their place we make the following four commitments:

- First, Providence city government will conduct all of its business according to the highest ethical standards.
- Second, city government will restore its financial integrity, and improve the city's long-term capacity to generate resources and manage its finances.
- Third, city government will hold each city department publicly accountable for clear planning, improved performance, and documented impact.
- Fourth, city government will consistently encourage public engagement in its work, through the active leadership of local residents and civic leaders.

\*\*\*\*\*

Now, let me turn to specifics.

First, let me discuss our approach to Ethics. I am establishing an Office of Municipal Integrity. This office will enable all departments of the city to observe consistent ethical practices. The Director of the Office will report directly to me, so that I get regular, unvarnished assessments of the progress we are making and the issues still before us.

In searching for the right person for this job, I will identify an individual of impeccable judgment and high standards, unafraid to tackle hard problems. I will appoint someone with the skills and experience to ensure that city government achieves and maintains the standards we have embraced.

Within ninety days, my administration will develop a new code of ethics for city government.

\*\*\*\*\*

On the subject of Financial Integrity, I announced a few days ago in a historic public/private partnership, that we have retained the nation's foremost consulting firm in urban fiscal planning and resource development. Playing a crucial interim role, they will participate in an intensive six-month program of analysis, planning and action to turn the city's financial fortunes around.

Out of this process, my administration will develop a five-year strategic financial plan for the city. The plan will encompass all aspects of the city's current situation—the large, unfunded pension liability, the pressing questions of compensation and health care for city workers, and the opportunities for additional revenue generation. It will propose an integrated approach to restoring Providence to a position of sound fiscal health and long-term strength.

In this same period, I will call upon the leaders of the city's hospitals, colleges, universities and other non-profit institutions to work with me to address the question of increasing city revenue from tax-exempt institutions.

\*\*\*\*\*

To make city government more accountable, I am announcing the creation of ProvStat, a comprehensive system for developing and maintaining databases on all city departments and services. This accountability and tracking system will enable us to show, at any given moment, exactly how we are doing in fighting crime, educating our children, and managing our finances.

I am also requiring an intensive internal review of all city departments, to identify all areas of potential savings, to eliminate waste, and to root out any possible remaining improper use of city resources.

City government will also improve the quality of its service to customers. Through an upgraded city website, residents will have access to records of City Council meetings, job listings, frequently requested forms, and upcoming city events in a move toward what my more technologically sophisticated staff refer to as “e-government.”

We will also create City Line, a 24/7 phone line. Through this resource, residents will be able to request needed city services.

\*\*\*\*\*

A city government seeking to effect major reform will succeed only with the vocal and committed support of engaged citizens. My administration will seek out resident input, criticism and suggestions through a variety of public engagement strategies.

I am pleased to report that the 45 members of the Transition Advisory Committee have agreed, at my urging, to continue their service as the newly formed Mayor’s Advisory Committee.

In addition, I plan four public forums in the coming months, to seek out the ideas and leadership of residents, employers, neighborhood organizations and others on the four pressing issues of Housing, Public Safety, Education and Growing the Providence Economy.

Public engagement depends more on you than on me for its success. While I can stress the importance of the public’s leadership, and seek your active involvement in policy-making, only *you* can make it happen. In order to achieve our goals, we must work together.

\*\*\*\*\*

I've just told you how we intend to change the way city government will work. Now let's talk about the work we will be doing.

\*\*\*\*\*

Helping all children and youth to succeed is the hardest and most important job in the United States. I am determined to make Providence a leader in youth development and school reform.

- I will do everything in my power to support the leadership of Dr. Melody Johnson, the Superintendent of Schools.
- I will actively participate in Ready to Learn Providence, a new citywide initiative to help young children prepare for school.
- I will support the redesign of our city's high schools, to make them more hospitable and effective, and to help turn the tide against our unacceptably high drop-out rate. Just as students have to be ready for school, our schools have to be ready for our students.

Most important, I will lead the efforts of the city to develop community schools. If our job is to help all children succeed, we must first recognize that the schools cannot do this alone -- we must *all* be involved.

Community schools help children and families to overcome the problems they face, in and out of school. Community schools are public schools which partner with local community organizations, in order to focus on the whole child, and his or her family. They provide after school programs, mentoring, and tutoring for children, as well as

mental health services, family literacy, parent education and support, and prevention and health programming.

If the children and youth of Providence are to emerge as the successful scholars, workers, citizens and leaders of the future, school buildings must become *centers for learning and youth development*, across the city. Under my administration, public school buildings will therefore be open to all -- in the afternoons, in the evenings, and on weekends. This is a major step, one that few other cities have successfully taken, and I look forward to implementing it.

\*\*\*\*\*

In both perception and reality, we must make Providence a safe place to live, work and visit. I've met *too many* seniors who have confided in me about their fear of leaving their homes. Many of our young people also do not feel safe in their neighborhoods.

Attracting experienced, proven leadership in public safety is my first priority. Within the coming two weeks, I expect to announce a nationally recognized law enforcement leader as Providence's next Police Chief.

To make all Providence neighborhoods safer, my administration will establish a vital, citywide community policing program, one that promotes crime prevention by developing high levels of communication and trust between police officers and neighborhood residents.

I will also improve the internal management of the police and fire departments by requiring department-wide financial and strategic planning reviews, to identify areas of strength, and to address problem areas.

\*\*\*\*\*

To create good jobs for Providence residents, we must focus on our strengths, and build our future economy around them.

- I will work closely with the health care, higher education and corporate communities to attract bio-medical and life science industry to Providence.
- I will forge public/private partnerships to engage businesses, non-profits and all levels of government in collaborative ventures that leverage all of the expertise and capacity in our city.
- I will convene and encourage Providence's arts and cultural institutions to work closely with the city to craft new business, commercial and tourist ventures to contribute to our growth.
- I will work to develop community-specific plans for development and investment, and expand adult literacy and job training opportunities across the city.
- I will work with builders, developers, and architects to foster a more inventive and neighborhood-focused set of plans and policies, and to rapidly put in place the infrastructure, facilities and resources needed to attract and retain new businesses.
- And, I will ensure that the process of dealing with city government becomes straightforward and transparent for all potential businesses and investors, so that we earn a new reputation—one of high standards of professionalism and ethics.

\*\*\*\*\*

Ethics. Education and Youth. Public Safety. Financial Integrity. Jobs.

There's a lot to do. We're aiming high because we have to. Since the election on November 5<sup>th</sup>, many people have said that this administration has a mandate for change. I agree. In fact, there are multiple mandates.

- There is a mandate to refuse to condone unethical practices in any city department, at any time, without exception.
- There is a mandate to root out *every* no-show commission or post, *every* unwarranted city paycheck or benefit going to a person who is not doing the work or earning the benefit.
- There is a mandate to give our children and youth the care, education and opportunity they deserve.
- There is a mandate to make our neighborhoods safer and more pleasant places to live and work.
- There is a mandate to put our financial house in order.
- There is a mandate to create a new, Providence economy.
- ***There is a mandate for change.***

But these mandates are not mine alone.

These mandates are not something I possess, or can wield like some version of Teddy Roosevelt's big stick.

These mandates are ***yours***. They are your collective voice. Our direction is clear, and you will not find a more dedicated leader for the changes that we must make.

And so we end where we began—with the pioneers of the human spirit who founded this fine city three and half centuries ago.

This is a time—like that time—for aiming high.

This is a time—like that time—for daring to hope... for believing in ourselves... and for calling on our government to do right, to do good, and to make change.

This is a time—and a place—for recognizing that we cannot get there separately, but must find a way to work together, at something larger and more difficult than we have tried before. Now, as before, we will get it done through the small, daily, courageous steps that each of us dares to take.

\*\*\*\*\*

One final story:

This summer I met a woman who told me that she had never voted. After participating in a meeting I held, she asked me to help her to register to vote, and I did.

Months later, on election night, she came up to me, with tears in her eyes. She said that she understood, now, what it meant to vote, and to know that her vote had made a difference.

That experience will stay with me, always. I think of it often. As a story of one person's courage and willingness to change, it is really a story about all of us. It offers compelling evidence that one or two small steps can carry us to important, new places.

For me, it is also a humbling reminder of the great responsibility that you have conferred upon me. You challenge me to live up to the high hopes, the passion, and the promise that we are all feeling today.

I promise you, with all my heart, that I will do my very best to meet that challenge.

\*\*\*\*\*

In closing, there *is* one other mandate, one that falls to me alone.

And that is to remind you, every day, that it is possible and necessary to feel hope for our future... resolve in the face of great difficulty... and a shared responsibility to work together, for the sake of the city that we love.

Let us begin today.

Thank you very much.

\*\*\*\*\*