

<http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/>

June 17, 2008, 4:58 pm

In Online Chat, Mayor Compares Partisanship to Smoking

By SEWELL CHAN



Is adherence to the Democratic or Republican parties like an addiction? Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg — a longtime Democrat who became a Republican to run for mayor in 2001, and then declared himself an independent in 2007 — drew just that analogy today in an online forum, [NewTalk](#), that is intended to bring together experts and leaders from across the political spectrum for civil, informative discussions of major issues.

The inaugural NewTalk discussion was on the subject, “[Is it possible to fix government?](#)” [Philip K. Howard](#), an expert on legal reform and the founder of NewTalk, opened the discussion by observing, among other things, that “Inertia, zealously guarded by special interests, is the m.o. of federal government.”

Mayor Bloomberg was the first of the guests to respond. The full text of his contribution to the online talk is below:

Thanks for the opportunity to participate in this discussion, Philip. This is my first time participating in an online discussion, but I can assure you I am not at home wearing my pajamas. This is a great group, the kind of crowd I’d enjoy having over for dinner. So I’m just going to pretend that we’re all sitting around a big table. I always learn something when I break bread with diverse groups of talented people, and I expect this conversation will be no different.

I don’t know that there’s a more important question hanging over this campaign than how we can fix our federal government, or at least get it in reasonably decent working condition. Philip began with the analogy of a sick patient, which seems apt. There are plenty of aspects of the disease, but one of them, at least as I see it,

is addiction to partisanship. It consumes good and smart people and leads them to put politics ahead of progress. Any position can be rationalized to meet the needs of the party's primary voters, campaign funders, and special interests. There's a certain dishonesty and deception inherent in that, and it prevents conversations about the hard choices that need to be made to achieve real reform.

I understand that we're not going to completely eliminate partisanship from Washington. But I don't think we're going to make real progress on the fundamental challenges we face—health care, global warming, education, and energy, to name a few—until we help more of those in Washington quit smoking the partisanship pipe.

Quitting any addiction takes guts and a willingness to reject peer pressure. And so my question to the group is: How do we help more candidates and elected officials acquire that courage? Our patient exhibits other harmful conditions that courage can help cure, including a deep-seated fear of innovation, accountability, and, as Philip mentioned, the trade-offs involved in hard decisions. So it seems to me to be a good place to start the conversation. Doctors?

The mayor's comments echo remarks he has made in the past decrying what he calls the culture of partisanship and gridlock in the nation's capital. But in comparing partisanship to an addiction, Mr. Bloomberg appears to be tying together his political independence with one of his signature accomplishments, the city's ban on indoor smoking.

Is the mayor trying to firm up his legacy as he contemplates leaving office at the end of next year? Or is he looking to build a basis for staying in politics, perhaps as a vice-presidential candidate or in a run for governor in 2010? The mayor's new remarks are likely to lead to new speculation on both questions.