

Hevesi talks politics at Central Queens Y



Photo by Gabriel Rom

Former State Comptroller Alan Hevesi, who served a year and half in jail for corruption, is making a comeback of sorts, lecturing at the YMHA in Forest Hills about the current political scene.

By Gabriel Rom

Former state Comptroller Alan Hevesi still enjoys a good debate.

Speaking at the Central Queens Y in Forest Hills, Hevesi, who was jailed for corruption in 2011, gave a lively, and at times combative, hour and a half talk on the state of American politics.

The 75-year-old ex-lawmaker, who began a 35-year political career as Forest Hills' assemblyman opened his remarks by making it clear that substantive, often complex, debates on national issues have been dropped this election cycle, while juvenile showmanship rule the airwaves.

"We aren't having debates and debating is part of politics," he said at the Monday lecture.

From FDR's court-packing scheme to Truman's steel-seizure, Hevesi enumerated the powers of the president and the limits of those powers.

Because of the U.S. Supreme Court's ability to check the president, Antonin Scalia's death stood out to Hevesi, noting that the late chief justice was brilliant, funny and extremely self-confident. The audience, mostly older and mostly Democrat, murmured in quiet disapproval.

"Because of the importance of the ninth judge, the election is now not just about the president but the tenor of American law for the next two decades," he said.

As the lecture continued, Hevesi goaded the audience to engage with him.

"You're all I get since I'm retired," he said.

The audience seemed more keen to argue with his political beliefs than with his political past as the only mention of Hevesi's extensive legal problems came from Hevesi himself.

Hevesi said his political allegiance was with fellow Democrat Hillary Clinton, he believed she would ultimately win the presidency in a landslide. Explaining his past with Clinton, Hevesi said that "when I got into my trouble, which no one has mentioned because you are all very polite, Hillary stood by me."

Hevesi resigned as state comptroller in December 2006. A plea deal spared him time behind bars for having a state driver chauffeur his ailing wife. Clinton was the U.S. senator from New York.

In October 2010, he pleaded guilty to investing \$250 million in pension funds with the private equity firm Markstone Capital Partners in exchange for \$1 million in gifts, campaign donations and paid trips to Italy and Israel.

He went on to make a case for increased regulation of guns while he probed the audience to consider their abortion beliefs more carefully.

"He really shouldn't be talking about this," a woman muttered.

"What is he, a doctor?" another said.

Hevesi contended that the point of having such uncomfortable discussions was to raise issues that weren't being debated.

"I don't know what better defines the complexity and intricacy of lawmaking more than the abortion question--and it'll never go away," Hevesi retorted.

Upbeat throughout, Hevesi expressed confidence in the resiliency of the American political system.

"Understand that even with all this ugliness, on January 20, the new president is inaugurated, and the former president who controls the world's strongest military will shake his hand and go off as a private citizen. Where else does that happen?"

When asked after the debate whether he had any aspirations to rejoin political life, Hevesi shook his head no.

"I'd rather hug my grandkids."

Reach reporter Gabriel Rom by e-mail at grom@cnglocal.com or by phone at (718) 260-4564.