

Richardson Dilworth

Last of the Bare-Knuckled Aristocrats

Peter Binzen with Jonathan Binzen

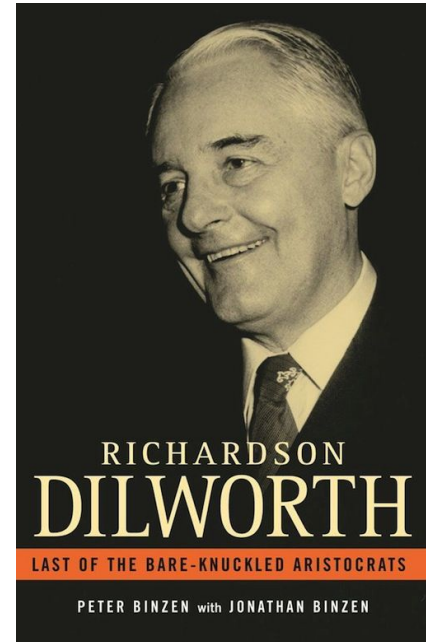
Chapter 7

Philadelphia was entirely controlled by Republicans when Richardson Dilworth, a Wilsonian Democrat, came to town in 1926. The GOP had been running the city since shortly after the Civil War, and showed no signs of yielding power. ...

Soon after Dilworth started working at Evans, Bayard & Frick, he received a first-hand lesson in machine politics. ... “As a young lawyer,” he recalled, “I had to do a good deal of City Hall work. In the Prothonotary’s office, no writ or pleading was accepted unless accompanied by at least 50 cents. The sheriff’s office gave no service ... unless properly rewarded. The fire marshal’s office, which issued permits for oil burners, refused to act on an application unless paid 10 cents for each gallon of capacity of the oil-storage tank. Commercial and industrial water installations were not metered. The amount paid the city by industrial and commercial users was negotiated after a suitable amount of cash was passed under the table.”

The GOP organization controlled the city’s cops by placing police stations immediately adjacent to Republican clubs in every ward. “No district police captain dared make a move,” Dilworth noted, “without the approval of the Republican ward leader. There was then no government welfare, relief, unemployment insurance, or Social Security. Consequently, when hard times hit, the many families affected had no place to go except to the police station, where the ward leader would preside in handing out buckets of coal, loaves of bread, and simple foodstuffs.” ...

Against this sordid backdrop, Dilworth and a few other reform-minded young Philadelphians — many of them lawyers — began working to awaken the



dormant Democrats. In 1927, they founded a small group called the Warriors, which they intended as the nucleus for a reinvigorated party. They started slowly, conducting registration drives, canvassing Democratic voters, and placing watchers at the polls. Their ability to influence local races was minimal at first, Dilworth later explained, because the machine was so powerful that “the Democratic candidates were all nominated by the Republicans.” But the Warriors helped to turn out huge crowds in Philadelphia for Alfred E. Smith, the Democratic candidate for president in 1928. Although Smith, the first Roman Catholic to be nominated for the presidency, lost the election to Herbert C. Hoover, he received 40 percent of the vote in GOP-controlled Philadelphia, and the Warriors were heartened. Four years later, Franklin D. Roosevelt would capture 45 percent of the city as he defeated Hoover for the presidency.

One of the Warriors was a young lawyer from Chestnut Hill named Joseph Clark, who shared political ambitions with Dilworth. Both came from wealthy Republican families and both were Ivy League graduates. ... Despite profound personality differences that would emerge later, the two patricians built an alliance that would change Philadelphia’s politics.

Joe Clark was the first of the pair to run for political office. In 1933, after the death in office of Bill Roper, a Philadelphia city councilman from Germantown ... a special election was held to replace him. Clark ran for the seat with Dilworth as his campaign manager. Although Clark lost, he made a decent showing. Elsewhere, the Democrats gained significant inroads, winning the elections for city controller and city treasurer.

With Roosevelt in the White House, Philadelphia’s Democrats naturally gained strength, and they contributed significantly to the victory in 1934 of Gov. George H. Earle 3d, who became the first Democrat to hold the office since 1894. ...

In 1934, [Matthew] McCloskey approached Dilworth and suggested that he run for the state Senate seat in the wealthy Chestnut Hill section. If he ran, he would be up against the incumbent, Republican George Woodward, an eccentric figure who was a medical doctor and a real estate developer as well as a state senator. Woodward was a reformer and a rare Republican who had never been under the sway of the GOP machine. He also happened

to be Dilworth's landlord. ...

Dilworth decided to accept the challenge, and Joe Clark agreed to be his campaign manager. Some days later, however, McCloskey called Dilworth in and said he would have to put up \$2,500 for the campaign fund if he wanted to run. "I didn't have \$2,500 in those days, so they slated Izzy Finkelstein," a little-known accident lawyer. Dilworth was incensed, and he decided to "buck the party" and run in the Democratic primary against Finkelstein.

To finance his race, Dilworth scraped together about \$1,200. Then along with Clark he visited all the ward leaders to drum up support. "They were all the biggest whores," he recalled years later. "They'd take one look at us and decide we were real patsies.... There was very little money they could get out of us, but what they could they did and just pocketed it." One of them was Herb McGlinchey, Democratic leader of the 42nd Ward. Dilworth said that he turned over more than a third of his money to McGlinchey before the election, only to get fewer votes in the 42nd Ward than in any other ward in the district.

"I spoke a little crossly to Herb about this," Dilworth wrote years later in a column in the Philadelphia Daily News. "He simply replied: 'That's your first political lesson; never trust a ward leader.' It was excellent advice, but expensively come by." ...

Recalling the campaign with a chuckle years later, Dilworth said that he and Clark "worked very hard but very ineffectively." The district, which he described as "virtually entirely white Protestant," voted overwhelmingly for Izzy Finkelstein, who got 11,000 votes to Dilworth's 1,000. But Finkelstein was crushed in the general election ...

Although Woodward's easy victory was yet more evidence of continued Republican dominance at the polls, Philadelphia Democrats were heartened by George Earle's success in capturing the governor's seat. One year later, in 1935, they aimed squarely at the mayor's office with John B. "Jack" Kelly a is their candidate.

Kelly, the son of working-class Irish immigrants, was a three-time Olympic gold medalist in sculling who made a fortune in brick contracting. (His daughter, Grace Kelly, would grow up to be a Hollywood star and the royal spouse of Prince Rainier of Monaco.) ...

Democrats were hopeful. In Jack Kelly they had a candidate with money, influence, drive, and a measure of fame. Kelly did run a strong campaign, but he lost to Republican S. Davis Wilson. But in doing so, he put a severe scare into the Republicans — and a charge into the Democrats — winning 47 percent of the vote to Wilson's 53 percent in an election that doubled the voter turnout from four years earlier. ...

Through the rest of the 1930s, Joe Clark and Richardson Dilworth continued to be politically active, but with little effect. Dilworth's observation captured the times: "We were always on the outside looking in."