

[Transcript] The Daily / How 100,000 Migrants Became a Political Crisis in New York

What does Malcolm Gladwell think about staying in the same profession your whole career?

There is a very large and underestimated risk in not changing your career trajectory.

That was his advice on my podcast, The Next Chapter, by American Express Business Class.

I'm Carter Garcia, and this season I sit down with bestselling authors including James Clear, Julie Zoo, and David Epstein to discuss business lessons from their books and what they would write for their next chapter.

And in the next chapter, by American Express Business Class, wherever you get your podcasts.

Now, according to my colleague Nick Fandos, it's also become a political crisis for the state's democratic leaders.

Good afternoon. I'm speaking to you today so you're aware of what your state government is doing to address the unprecedented migrant crisis.

Nick, tell me about this speech from the governor of New York.

So the governor of New York, Kathy Hochel, announced a couple of weeks ago that she was going to be making a major address to the state.

These are pretty unusual for her.

I'm fully aware that New Yorkers are concerned that over the past year, more than 100,000 asylum seekers have arrived in our state requiring an historic humanitarian response.

And she wanted to talk about the migrant crisis that's been building over the last year here in New York and the new phase that New York seemed to be entering into as literally thousands of asylum seekers come into the state every week.

But now, many of you are starting to see open space turn into enormous temporary shelters, buses arriving at hotels in several upstate counties.

And what was particularly notable about this speech was not the way she was diagnosing the problem, but where she was putting the blame.

This crisis originated with the federal government and it must be resolved through the federal government.

So for the first time, the governor of New York, and she's a Democrat, a proud Democrat, came out and was putting the blame pretty squarely at the feet of the White House and President Biden, saying, we need your help, you got to step up here.

That's why today I have sent a letter to President Biden formally requesting immediate executive action.

And as if she hadn't been clear enough, the governor then puts out a press release actually naming President Biden, pointing the finger at him explicitly.

It is past time for President Biden to take action and provide New York with the aid needed to continue managing the ongoing crisis.

So she's naming names and the name she's naming is the Democratic President of the United States, which means this isn't quite the normal course of events.

A Democratic governor from a very Democratic state directly critiquing in public her Democratic president.

Yeah, you're totally right, Michael, and it's even more striking because the governor had been very careful to take a more conciliatory approach to Washington as New York has been dealing with this crisis.

She's been trying to talk to the White House regularly, which has been a pretty stark contrast to Eric Adams, the mayor of New York and her counterpart as kind of the big Democratic leader in New

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York.

This is one of the largest humanitarian crises that this city has ever experienced.

Who for months now has just been slugging at the White House.

Instead of standing on the steps of city hall, we should be standing on the steps of the White House.

Day after day, week after week, demanding more help.

And asking the national government, what are you doing to the city of New York?

And saying basically President Biden is leaving New York high and dry.

The president and the White House has failed New York City on this issue.

Now you also have the governor joining him in saying that.

And in the last couple of weeks, as I've been reporting across the state, I've seen that sentiment spreading like wildfire among Democratic congressional candidates that I've talked to, particularly those running in house seats in the suburbs surrounding New York City.

Remember, just a year ago, Republicans helped win their House majority by sweeping through a series of suburban swing districts around New York City and elsewhere in the state Democrats had held for a long time.

Now these Democratic candidates that are trying to win these seats back, who see a path back to the majority, but only through New York, are concerned that this issue, the arrival of 100,000 asylum seekers and counting here in New York City,

and all of the fallout from it is going to become another super potent political issue that may once again cost them these key seats and with it control of the House of Representatives.

Nick, I want to talk about how it is we've reached this point where so many Democratic lawmakers from, as you just said, the mayor, to the governor, to now candidates and even members of Congress have become so riled up and publicly angry with their Democratic president over this question of these migrants.

So where should we start?

So I think we have to go back a couple of years and down to the southern border, Michael, where many of these asylum seekers are crossing into the United States in the first place.

The Trump White House and the Biden White House were able to use COVID-era policies, most notably Title 42, to basically shut down the border for a period of time.

And has that expired over the last year or so?

There has been a significant buildup in the number of people crossing the border in the first place.

And as that buildup is happening, as more and more migrants are crossing the border into states like Texas, the governor there, Greg Abbott, in the middle of last year, began putting them on buses and giving them a one-way ticket to cities up north, like New York and Chicago and Washington.

Places that tend to be more liberal to try and provoke them, basically, to poke at their liberal policies and say, hey, this is what we're dealing with down in Texas.

Why don't you see what it feels like when they're at your doorstep?

Right, the idea being to essentially bring the southern border and the broken immigration system to these blue states in the north, effectively forcing them to deal with the same kind of issues that Texas does because of where it is.

Yes, and frankly, to make a political point, right, to show it's easy to state your values when you're a thousand miles away and this is not on your doorstep.

Let's see how it goes once these people have arrived.

So over the course of the last year, as Abbott and then Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida are sending

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people north, New York really becomes the top destination and the epicenter of the migrant crisis in this new phase.

Not only do you have these Republican governors sending people, but New York has a really attractive magnet for people.

There's some unique factors, I think, that are worth pausing to consider for a second.

One, there's no city in the world that is probably more associated with immigrants and immigration.

The Statue of Liberty stands in the harbor for a reason and New York has a reputation.

And so as people are crossing over the border, it's a natural destination.

And because there are so many immigrants already here, many people might have relatives or relations.

And so when they're asked, where do you want to go, they say New York City.

New York City is also the only city in the country which has this unique mandate known here as the right to shelter.

So going back to the 1980s, this says that New York City has to pay basically to house anybody who doesn't have a bed tonight in New York City at the taxpayer expense.

They'll be put up in a shelter or somewhere else, which means that migrants who come here to New York are going to get shelter.

They're going to get legal assistance.

They're going to get health care and their kids are going to be enrolled in public schools.

So that means that everybody that's arriving on these buses are entitled to those benefits.

But where it also gets out very quickly and it makes New York City seem like a very attractive place to want to steer yourself.

Even if you're not being brought up on a bus from a Republican official in Texas who wants to make a political point.

Right. And people come through all sorts of different routes and different means of transportation.

So what starts as a political stunt to steer migrants to New York City evolves into something quite different.

Now they're not coming here under the influence of a governor, but because they want to be in New York City.

It's a destination, a place that they want to start a new life on.

And when that starts to happen, this influx really takes on a life of its own.

Over the weekend, the city reached a critical tipping point for their already jam-packed shelters.

2,000, 3,000 people a week sometimes are coming in through the Port Authority and need a place to stay at night.

And by law, they have one.

In response to the growing number of migrants arriving here, Mayor Adams announced new humanitarian emergency response and relief centers.

Two centers will be opening in the coming weeks.

And the city already has a large network of homeless shelters that operates, but those are becoming strange.

We have people sitting in shelters and in hotel rooms with no place to go, no work, no way to get around the city.

They start putting migrants in hotels.

This last week, angry residents out on Staten Island shouted at migrants arriving.

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Do you get free Wi-Fi at home?

I don't.

Do you get free salto at home?

I don't.

The city has started building these massive tent structures all around the city in parks and in public spaces.

In Floyd Bennett Field, it is a flood zone.

Including where people go to recreate and play soccer and walk their dogs.

They were at capacity, so these migrants were left to sleep on the sidewalk.

You can see the only thing separating them from the concrete is cardboard.

At one point, they appear at least to become so backlogged.

You started seeing hundreds of migrants sleeping on the sidewalk outside of one of the intake centers in Midtown Manhattan,

which was a real kind of alarm bell moment that this is getting out of control.

Who is going to really suffer if we continue in this way?

It's going to be our services, sanitation, education, police department, fire department.

And so we have to stop it now.

All this costs a lot of money, Michael.

New York City and New York State have already spent billions of dollars collectively

and are estimating that this could cost \$10 to \$12 billion over the next couple of years.

Now, these are places with big tax bases and big budgets, but that's a big chunk of change.

That level of spending is not sustainable.

And it's not part of the budget because it wasn't anticipated.

It was not anticipated.

And it means, down the line, unless this money comes magically from somewhere else,

New York is going to have to start looking at cutting certain services,

cutting back on its budgets for things that longtime New Yorkers may count on.

Just this week, for example, New York City is trying to house 58,000 migrants on top of its regular homeless population.

Which is the population of a meaningful city.

Yeah, a lot of cities in this country.

And put, get this 20,000 children into the New York City public school system to begin educating them.

And all of this, Michael, has been building towards what feels like potentially a breaking point.

The cost is just ramping up and up and up in terms of people, in terms of budget, in terms of actual space.

I mean, where do you put these numbers of people in New York City or in the state?

And it has begun to spill over into the political system.

Inevitably, a crisis of government becomes a crisis of politics.

And all of this is increasingly alarming for Democrats,

who fear that this is an unpredictable issue that could be a very potent weapon used against them next year,

in all kinds of races across the state and especially in the race for control of Congress.

We'll be right back.

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Nick, what exactly do New York Democrats fear is going to happen because of this migrant crisis that's unfolding across the city?

Just unpack that. What scenario are they envisioning?

So to answer that, Michael, imagine it's a year from now.

We're on the eve of the election and this problem has not abated.

There's been tens of thousands more migrants who have arrived in New York City, putting more strain on all the different services we've been talking about.

The city's basically run out of space in a lot of places.

The state's trying to help, but it's running out of money.

And I think Democrats are very worried about the way that Republicans are going to portray this and the way that voters are going to think about what's going on here.

Are they going to conclude that Democrats' policy to welcome immigrants to say, we treat them differently here and we give them services?

Is that going to backfire and say, well, look, that's all nice.

We like those values in a vacuum, but that means you're kind of pulling out of my pocket to take care of these people.

And now Republicans very much are already beginning to make this argument.

This is the consequence of Democrats' liberal policies on immigration.

And not only have they helped bring about this situation,

now that it's at their doorstep, they can't competently handle it.

They're all pointing fingers at one another.

There's an appearance of chaos that nobody's in charge.

And look, this is the sum package of what Democrats get you.

So what Democrats fear is that Republicans will make the case in the next election that Democrats created this crisis and now they have no idea how to fix it.

And you, dear New Yorker, you are left to suffer, which is why you should vote for Republicans.

Exactly.

And I think part of the reason that Democrats are so worried about this is what happened in 2022.

So remember, Michael, we sat here and talked then about the way that Republicans were able to use fears about crime and rising crime in New York City to basically point at Democratic policies and say this is the reason this is happening and now these guys can't get it under control.

Right.

And there was a degree to which that claim was exaggerated and yet it proved very potent in those 2022 congressional elections.

Right.

And it wiped out basically every Democrat on the congressional map in districts that really should have been safe Democratic territory but became a real bloodbath for them.

Right.

So obviously there are big substantive policy differences between these two issues of crime and migration.

But the political dynamic and the kind of interaction among the two parties and voters are very similar.

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You have a big situation in the center of New York City, a kind of unfolding crisis that on any given day lends itself to some headline about disorder or conflict.

And it's being piped out into the swingier suburbs that surround New York City where voters are watching and frankly thinking in this state where Democrats have been in control of everything for a long time like maybe they're just screwing it up again.

Got it.

Give us some examples of the Democrats in these swingier suburbs around New York becoming agitated about what's going on here.

Okay.

So the first person I point you to is Pat Ryan, who was the only Democrat who survived that Republican wipeout over crime last year. He represents a seat in kind of the lower Hudson Valley.

North of New York City, hour and a half, two hours.

Right.

So earlier this year when Mayor Eric Adams proposed busing migrants out of the city into some communities in Ryan's district to help shoulder some of the burden,

Ryan was one of a number of officials who freaked out.

He called on President Biden to declare a state of emergency, which is a pretty drastic step.

He voted for a Republican bill that would have basically barred schools from housing migrants in New York, said, we'll take away federal funds if you do.

And he's adopted very aggressive rhetoric towards not just the mayor, but also the president of the United States.

So last week when I spoke to Ryan, who's a former army officer, he told me that the one thing that I learned above all in my time in the army is that when you're in charge, you have to take charge.

The president is in charge here and he's not taking charge.

So like Mayor Adams and now Governor Huckle,

Congressman Ryan is turning his frustration over the situation onto the president.

Yeah, that's right.

And he's not alone in doing it.

Candidates from Long Island like Laura Gillan,

Mondair Jones, who's a former Democratic congressman

trying to make a comeback in Westchester County in the suburbs north of the city,

other candidates in the Hudson Valley are all pointing their finger at President Biden and saying like, you got to get in the game on this.

This is a federal problem and we need a federal solution to it.

Well, with that in mind, what specifically do these New York Democrats want Joe Biden, want the federal government to do here,

given the nature of the problem and some of the unique factors you have outlined

like New York City's right to shelter?

That's a great question.

So there are basically a handful of important requests that they have.

The first one is for money.

We were talking earlier about how much New York City and state are spending on this and they feel this is a federal issue, right?

So the federal government ought to be reimbursing for National Guard, for the cost of sheltering, basically to help shoulder some of the cost.

Another important thing that they want is for the White House to help people get to work faster. So the prime example of this is something called temporary protected status.

It's where the president can himself grant a group of people from a specific country a special status to make it easier for them to get a work permit.

And that's important in this case because when migrants can get jobs, they're making money, they're paying into the system, they become less reliant on shelters and healthcare and other public benefits like that. Got it.

So the idea is that temporary protected status gets migrants on their own to feed in a way that means they're not going to need New York City's resources as much.

And I guess in theory, it might discourage some of these migrants from ever coming to New York in the first place because if they have the right to work, they might stop at many other states on that journey north to New York and find a job. Yeah, that may be the case.

But I think it's worth just pausing here to say New York is in such a drastic circumstance right now and it's such a fast-moving situation that I don't think New York's leaders are really thinking that far down the road.

They're just thinking about how do we alleviate this situation right now?

How do we move some of those 58,000 people out of the shelters as quickly as we can? Got it.

So what has President Biden said about these two requests for a lot more money to help solve this problem as well as temporary protected status for a lot of these migrants?

Well, the first thing to say, and this is one of the things that's really frustrating Democrats here, is that he hasn't said much at all.

He's not given a major speech on this issue.

It's not like we've seen him come into New York for photo ops to try and take control in a way that you might expect an executive facing a big national problem like this to do.

But the White House has done some small things around the edges.

So on the money front, the Biden administration has helped secure hundreds of millions of dollars to reimburse New York.

Now, that's not as much as New York wants.

It says it needs billions, but the White House has put its hands up basically and said, look, Congress controls the purse strings.

We can ask for more money, but I can't guarantee you we're going to get it.

Got it.

And on the question of work permits, the response has been more complicated,

and the White House has actually pushed back a bit on New York.

Why?

Their concern, particularly with temporary protected status, is that it's going to create an incentive for more people to come, actually, and will exacerbate the national immigration problem.

So while it might help New York in the short term, it's going to make the United States a much more attractive place to come.

I mean, bearing all the risks in mind of getting to the United States, if you were a member of a protected group and you know when I get to the United States, I'm going to be able to have certain protections there.

I'm going to be able to work into more attractive offer.

Basically, what President Biden is saying in responses, that what's good for New York, unfortunately, is not good for the rest of the country, and it's not good policy.

That's right.

So there's clearly a stalemate here, which I'm guessing is extremely frustrating, especially to these New York Democrats trying to deal with this crisis.

I'm curious if any of these Democrats who are leveling this criticism against Biden have had any reservations about criticizing the leader of their party in their conversations with you, given that he is running for reelection and that the polls suggest it's going to be a very tight race.

It doesn't seem like an opportune moment for candidates and members of Congress in the Democratic Party to be criticizing the president.

Yeah, I think that that's a really good question,

and it's something that Democrats are definitely thinking about in this moment where it kind of feels like it's every Democrat for themselves.

The risk here, I think, is that for these candidates to point at President Biden or even at Mayor Adams or Governor Huckle to kind of get the blame off themselves to make it look like I'm taking this seriously, this person is failing to provide leadership.

That may help them in the short term,

but I think that there's a real risk of a kind of boomerang effect that comes back around and makes it look like to your average voter who's maybe not that politically engaged, then instead of solving this, Democrats are just fighting with each other.

The governor's blaming the mayor, who's blaming the president, who's blaming the congressman, and that's not a great look for the party.

That's, in fact, exactly what they're afraid Republicans are going to succeed in reinforcing.

This idea that Democrats are more interested in bickering at each other and are not here to solve the problem.

Right, for example, if you're Biden, you might be very tempted to turn around and say to these members of Congress who are mad at him, look, this is your job. It's your job as a member of Congress to fix immigration.

Yeah, and there's some truth to that, right?

I mean, we've been having a debate in this country for decades now about the need for comprehensive immigration reform.

Both parties have some responsibility in not having passed, and both parties agree that the system is broken as it is right now. There was a proposal about a decade ago that was bipartisan, that got close to passing, and Republicans tanked it. So if you're Democrats, you could look at this whole situation and go on the attack and say, actually, it's Republicans who have stood in the way of comprehensive reform, the kind of thing that may have helped us prevent this crisis unfolding in New York right now. And so they're actually the ones that you should be blaming for this. And we do have some Democratic candidates attacking Republicans on this and saying, look, you guys control the house, you're the ones in power, in Washington, it's your responsibility to help fix this. But I think the thing is, it's just hard for that to break through when you have the mayor and the governor, Democrats with bigger platforms than anybody else in New York, just pointing fingers at each other. Right. It strikes me, Nick, that for Republicans, this entire episode has been a very successful political strategy, a cynical strategy in many people's minds, but a very effective one. Because what started with a few busloads of migrants sent to New York to embarrass the leaders of a blue state has now triggered all this infighting, like you just described, among the Democrats. And it has given Republicans this very powerful weapon to use in these crucial house races and potentially a roadmap for keeping control of Congress. Yeah. And that's no small deal. And I'd add one more thing. It's made the mayor of the largest city in the country and one of the most important Democratic governors in the country into critics of the president. And though they may not agree with Greg Abbott or other Republicans about what the policy failures are here or how to fix it, they have validated the essential structure that President Biden is responsible for this and ought to be taking more drastic action. You don't often see that in politics, right? The Democrats are saying to the whole world, maybe they don't even mean to say this, that Republicans are kind of right about Biden and immigration. That is certainly how Republicans are going to present it. So, Nick, what happens next in this story? And specifically, what happens to all these migrants, these 100,000 men, women and children who are now in New York City? A lot of these people went through arduous conditions to get here in the first place and they're going to work really hard and figure out how to get jobs, either legally or in the underground economy and make money and move out of the shelter system. But as long as people continue to come, as New York remains an attractive place, the numbers are just going to continue to grow and put a greater and greater strain on New York City and its capacity to care for these people. And we've talked a lot about the political and government implications of that, but for the migrants themselves, it means that they're going to be relying on an increasingly tax

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system

that's not going to be able to provide for them in the way that it has.

And if that system buckles, it's going to leave a lot of very vulnerable people in a very bad situation.

Well, Nick, thank you very much.

Thank you, Michael.

We'll be right back.

Here's what else you need to know today.

On Tuesday, the most powerful Republican in the U.S. Senate, Minority Leader Mitch McConnell sought to reassure his colleagues that he is physically able to keep doing his job after a series of on-camera medical episodes.

During those episodes, McConnell has frozen up for long stretches in the middle of news conferences,

seemingly unable to speak.

In a letter released on Tuesday by McConnell, the doctor who treats members of Congress said he found no signs that McConnell suffered from either seizures or strokes, two possibilities that have been raised by outside experts.

McConnell and his staff have instead attributed both instances to light-headedness related to a concussion he suffered in March and to dehydration.

And Enrico Tario, the former leader of the Proud Boys, was sentenced to 22 years in prison for the role he played in the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol.

It was the most severe penalty imposed on anyone charged in connection with the deadly assault.

Tario was found guilty of seditious conspiracy for inspiring and organizing members of his pro-Trump gang

to enter the Capitol and try to stop the peaceful transfer of presidential power.

Today's episode was produced by Carlos Prieto, Mary Wilson, Michael Simon Johnson, and Asta Chaturvedi.

It was edited by Rachel Quester and Patricia Willins, contains original music by Will Reed and Rowan Nemisto,

and was engineered by Alyssa Moxley.

Our theme music is by Jim Brunberg and Ben Landvork of Wonder Lake.

That's it for the Daily. I'm Michael Balbarro. See you tomorrow.