Kelly Brownell:

Hello, everyone, and welcome to Policy 360. I'm Kelly Brownell, the Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. Today, I'm extremely pleased to welcome New Orleans mayor Mitch Landrieu to the program. This summer, Politico asked 71 mayors across the country which city leader had engineered the biggest turnaround. Mitch Landrieu received this honor from his peers. Politico noted that Mayor Landrieu is, and I'm quoting here, "Enjoying what is widely hailed is one of the most successful mayorships in America, leading efforts on public health, infrastructure, and a personal crusade against gun violence." Welcome to Policy 360.

Mitch Landrieu:

It's great to be here. Thank you for having me.

Kelly Brownell:

So you've served in public office since 1988, first as a member of Louisiana's House of Representatives, then as lieutenant governor, and now as mayor of New Orleans. David Osborne, who published the book Reinventing Government, said of New Orleans the year you took office that it was the least competent city government he had ever seen. What was the problem at that time?

Mitch Landrieu:

Well, as you may recall, Louisiana got hit badly as a consequence of 9/11, because many years before that, we had built a lot of the jobs around tourism, not only just oil and gas and the maritime. And when people quit flying, the economy in New Orleans, it just went down to nothing. So it took us a number of years to get healthy again, and right when we were back to where we were, Katrina hit. Now, Katrina was the worst manmade disaster, and I put in quotes manmade disaster because it was an engineering failure. It wasn't a natural disaster. But it was the largest manmade disaster that had befallen an American city, I mean, in many, many years, if not throughout the whole history of the country. We lost 1800 people. 500,000 homes got damaged. 250,000 were destroyed. We literally lost everything in the city. It was underwater, 17 feet, for a long period of time.

And then, as though that were not enough, we got hit by Rita three weeks later, which hit on the western side of the state, only about 300 miles from New Orleans, which was the entry point from anybody coming into the state. And then we got hit by Ike and then we got hit by Gustav. Then we got caught in the middle of the national recession, and then we suffered the BP oil spill. And then I took office right after that.

The city for the most part had a government that did not exist. I mean, most if not all of the employees had been fired. The city was on the verge of bankruptcy. Most of the institutions of governing are delivering things to people like healthcare, education, were just disorganized and not functioning very, very well. And so we had to take over in the midst of all of that and completely rebuild what I affectionately call the mouse trap of not only the government, but how the government interrelates to all of the other entities that created the school system, the healthcare delivery system, and that kind of stuff. And so we found ourselves in a really bad situation, and we had no money and we had to figure out a way out of it. And that's what David Osborne I think was describing at the time.

Kelly Brownell:

How in the world do you begin when there are so many things to deal with?

Mitch Landrieu:

You know, the truth of the matter is it was really hard to determine where to begin. The first thing we tried to figure out is, well, what we had. And I remember when I got to the government itself, there really wasn't an organizational chart. We didn't know how many employees we had. We didn't know how many cars we owned. We didn't know who was doing what. And what had happened since Katrina was that because most of the employees got fired and because a lot of federal recovery money was coming in, which was not organized well at the time, and FEMA was beginning to find its way into competence, which they have done fairly well now, we began really to just redesign the government.

But we had to ask ourselves, well, what is it we're trying to design? What is it we're trying to do? And we had to go back and just answer some core questions. What's our purpose? What role are we playing? Are we doing things we're not supposed to be doing? Are there things we're not doing that we are supposed to be doing? And what's the best way to deliver that service to the people? It was a very functional question. It wasn't a theoretical question. And this is when I came to learn what most mayors in America always knew, which is that mayors are not ideologically bent. If you are, you will fail. Really what you have to do is you have to find a problem and fix a problem, and you have to keep doing it every day until the citizens have what they need.

Now, what was interesting was that we had I think a budget at the time, approximately it was about $460 million in the operating budget. We had a $100 million hole in our budget. That's 22%. Now, I remember in the legislature where I served for 16 years, us complaining about cutting the budget by 2% or 3%, or adding to the budget. And usually the ideological battle got between is government bigger or is it smaller? And that was the metric. Or on the congressional level, them arguing that what they wanted to do in a cut was actually cut the growth. Nobody ever said to me, "I need you to cut $100 million in six months out of your budget." And these are real cuts, because when you're on the local level, the decision that you make hits the ground the next day. It's not some theoretical number that winds its way through some federal bureaucracy. It really hits the ground the next day.

And so we set about thinking about how you cut that much money out of the government and not decimate it so that it will be dead, because if you think about it practically, there's a way to cut weight off of something. You can just cut an arm off or a leg, but you won't be able to use your arm and you won't be able to walk. The other way to do it is try to what I call cut with a scalpel. You do it very thoughtfully. You do it very precisely. You do it smartly, and you do it in a way so if the government gets healthy again, in partnership with the private sector, it actually grows back in a healthy way. And in order to do that, we had to make some qualitative decisions about things that we were doing.

And so I'll give you one example. We had had a health department that for some reason had gotten into the business of delivering primary healthcare, not just preventative care through [inaudible 00:06:06] clinics, but we actually had doctors and nurses that were running clinics, and they weren't well-financed and they weren't doing a good job. We thought it would be a better idea to let the not-for-profit and the private sector do that. So we began to facilitate a transfer into the community and build primary healthcare clinics that were not us. And then we transitioned all of those employees to those jobs. So we took that responsibility away from us, so somebody could do it better. And we thought in that instance, it was a good idea to outsource that.

One of the things we did the exact reverse of was fleet management. We had some contractor managing our fleet. We couldn't keep control of it. We didn't think that was a wise idea. So we went and hired people and built capacity inside of government, and brought that function back in. And by doing that every day, I called it cutting, reorganizing, investing, and growing. And every day, like when people say go on a diet, we're talking about going to a lifestyle change. We changed the way we actually saw

ourselves. And as a consequence over time, we were able to reduce our expenditures and bring it in line with the revenues that were coming in.

And just the other day, we passed our seventh balanced budget. We've gotten the highest credit rating that the city of New Orleans has ever had, because we've been able to manage our way back into what I would call a healthy governing entity that's actually delivering services pretty well now.

Kelly Brownell:

A remarkable story. And you pointed to several examples that showed not being ideological can work, and you just have a problem solving orientation.

Mitch Landrieu:

You know, when you get away, and I'll speak to this because of this national campaign that we just had, and you'll see this in governors' races and you'll recognize it in legislative races, if you pay attention. I was a legislator for 16 years. I have great regard for people that serve on the state level, and as you know, I was a lieutenant governor. Now, when I was lieutenant governor, I was responsible for actually managing a department. I had the Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism, which was a big deal in Louisiana. So from that perspective, I had a management job.

But when I was a legislator, and now that I'm a mayor, I can see more clearly that my job as a legislator was basically to advocate. And we would argue about whatever, the hottest issues, abortion, the death penalty, immigration, whatever it might be, and people would take ideological positions without really much regard to, well, when that position becomes a law and then it becomes a policy, and then you have to go through the administrators act and create regulations, that somebody actually has to execute that.

And what I've come to notice as a mayor, the distance between the theory and the space of execution, there's a lot lost in translation. It looks really different. And then when you are the one who has to execute, it forces you, if you're a thoughtful person, to be temperate and to be practical because ideologically bent answers do not generally work. And when you're on the ground, most human beings, when they're going to and from work, don't consider themselves to be a Republican or a Democrat [inaudible 00:09:01]. They just want the streetlight to work. They want the schools to work. They want their job available to them. And then they want to participate in the civic community. And that entire kind of theoretical frame that encapsulates us during these presidential races almost is non-existent down on the local level, and there's a complete disconnect.

Mayors live on the ground. We govern in real time and we govern in reality. We don't govern in theory and in space, and it just creates a different dynamic. And I think it produces a different kind of leader.

Kelly Brownell:

So you're here as part of our Innovator in Residence program, our inaugural visitor. So thank you very much for that. How in the world can you be innovative in the culture where government was so dysfunctional, and people have vested interest, and you do have the ideologues pushing for one sort of policy over another?

Mitch Landrieu:

Well, actually, it's the best place. I mean, mostly where the ideologues and the special interests are pushing is on the state level. On the local level, number one, you don't have as many. Number two, you

have a lot of pressure from citizens to get it done, whatever it takes. Find a way or make one is basically what people say. And you don't have a lot of time. And then what you have, and what is reason why cities are leading the innovation race right now, and why New Orleans has become this nation's most immediate laboratory of innovation and change, is because we literally did not have a choice. We had to construct something out of nothing. We had to do it without a lot of stuff, without a lot of money, without a lot of people.

And typically, without being too [inaudible 00:10:33] about this, it's not a whole lot different than when you went to kindergarten. Everybody has this experience, when your mama sent you to school and she sent you to school with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, but you didn't want peanut butter and jelly. You wanted something else. You had to go find a friend, and you started sharing. And then everybody started swapping. That kind of idea, of finding friends, sharing, and in my office, we put a term on this. One of the things people will do for mayors is show up if they ask. So the mayor has convening power. And one of the great things that a mayor can see is a lot of people at one time, because we're blessed with having to go to so many places and talk to so many people.

And so if you use your convening power to bring people together that you might've met in disparate parts of the city, that will say to you something that they care about, and you'll recognize, wow, I was across town and there was another person I met that wanted to do that, and that's something that I need. So you facilitate a meeting, you bring those people together, you link them together, and then you help show them how you can leverage their assets in partnership with what the city has. And if the mayor and his team are willing to take a risk, you can try something different. And so those are really kind of the seeds of innovation.

And so one of the things that I was just very interested in was not trying to create new things, but trying to find new answers to old problems, really basic things. So for example, one of the things people complained about a lot in the city is it takes so long to get a road project done, really kind of a common complaint. I get it from my mother all the time. I'm trying to go to the doctor, and I can't get there. There's too much traffic. You do too much road construction. Why is this street taking so long? Right?

And so one of the things I did was I said, look, why don't we find out what the problem is? Well, one of my challenges was that each of my department heads was busy. They were busy running their particular department. And I had always had this premonition that departments were not talking to each other, so I needed something different. And so we created something called an innovation team. Think about them as like the Navy SEALs. And this was funded by Bloomberg's group, when they came in and said, what are the things you want to do? I said, "I want to do two things. I want to reduce murder, and I want to improve customer service."

So in order to do that, we hired five or six really, really smart people. And they answered directly to me, and I gave them the authority to go into any department they wanted to, and all of them to think about how they changed the way they worked with each other so that we could produce a better result. And the first thing I said was, "Go figure out how to get contracts let appropriately, cleanly, transparently, but quickly, and then close the distance between the time we left with the contract, the time the road work gets done, and then how fast the project takes."

And I think when I first got there, it took something like 800 days to move stuff through the process. Then we moved it down to 150. Then we moved it down to 90. And then we just, all those processes that we're part of, all the little bitty separate pieces that were part of that big thing, actually got more efficient, more effective, and they started to deliver a different service.

So when that worked, we started to do that with blight, because we had a lot of blighted properties because they all got wet. So we took that way, of having a SEAL team to go in to analyze it, of creating partnerships between the private and the public sector, finding faith-based community organizers, everybody putting in, and we applied it to different problems and came up with a unique solution with each and then baked it into the way government works. And over time we became a more competent government and more effective and more efficient.

Kelly Brownell:

What an amazing story. Can we return for a moment to the aftereffects of Hurricane Katrina?

Mitch Landrieu:

Sure.

Kelly Brownell:

You mentioned the scope of the devastation that occurred at the time, and there must be many lingering issues, even today. What are some of those that you confront in the city?

Mitch Landrieu:

Well, first of all, we are in a much better place than we were 10 years ago. It took us a while to get our feet underneath us. And again, as I would like to just hammer home, it is the way of how we do things now that's so different from, and not just the thing. A thing is a building you build or a road that you build, a police department that you reconstruct, but how you do that, and in New Orleans, before it used to be top down and it used to be fairly narrow.

I recreated the way the government works. We have a deputy mayor system and I've instructed all my people, do not bring me a recommendation that does not have everybody involved in it, partners. And it has to be faith-based. It has to be not-for-profits. It has to be the business community and government. And we collectively have to invest in it financially, and then we have to take responsibility for getting it done. Bring me a model around any problems. So that's the first thing.

And as a consequence, we have completely reconstructed our education system. We've completely reconstructed our healthcare delivery system. The other day, we just opened the newest veteran's administration hospital in America, and it's across the street from the newest university hospital in America. It's very similar to the two hospitals that you have in town here, but they're brand new. And both of those things will now form the future of economic development, of healthcare delivery, and technology transfer in the city. And it's really going to transform what we do.

Now, if you've got that moving in partnership with the schools, almost all of our schools are charter schools now. And it's noted, actually, in the New York Times today, that we see great success. We see higher graduation rates, higher movement towards colleges, lower dropout rates. We have the achievement gap that's closing between the kids in the city and the kids in the rest of the state. We have fewer suspensions over time. Now, if you think about it, you need really two things to do well, you've got to be healthy and you've got to be smart. Now, before we didn't have the opportunity to be healthy and smart. Now we have those opportunities.

Now what we've got to do, which goes to your question, you've got to do the hard work of living through it. The kids got to go to school, right? You've got to make sure you're healthy. And of course, every human being that needs to be formed appropriately over time and has to have good guidance, has

to actually live through the years it takes to become really a good human being. New Orleans didn't have that opportunity before. We have that opportunity now.

And you take both of those things and you lay them on top of the major infrastructure investments that we've made, in some instances at the behest of the American public, who invested significantly in rebuilding our levies, rebuilding our roads. So you've got major investments in infrastructure, major investments in healthcare, major investments in education. We now have a chance that we never had before. What we do have still, though, is we have a large number of people that are not as healthy as they should be, not as educated as they should be, a violence problem that continues to be one of the most difficult that we see in a very difficult time. Not withstanding the fact that we've reduced it by half since 1996, we still have, in my opinion, a catastrophic problem. And I think those are the challenges.

Kelly Brownell:

You paint this amazing story of a city that has been completely reformed in the way government is done, and a wonderful success story. When people look at higher levels of government, state and federal government, they don't see that positive a picture. Is there any way to take that kind of innovation and lessons learned from cities and have them apply to higher levels of government?

Mitch Landrieu:

Well, first of all, let me say this, I have painted a really good picture, but what I painted a picture was of a new opportunity and a foundation that now has to be used appropriately over time. So New Orleans is a beautiful city. It's architecturally beautiful. The souls of the people are beautiful. If you went and visited there, you would have a spectacular time. But we have challenges. Now you've got to do the hard work, and the hard work is making the right choices, to go to a different place.

My frustration that I have with the federal government and the state governments is that they have gotten to be too far away from the consequences of their decisions. And they seem to me to be out of touch with the reality of governing. And so when I listen to them, and I think I speak for a lot of mayors in the country, when we listen to Washington talk, mostly on the legislative side, we don't understand why they talk about the things that they talk about, how long it takes them to make decisions, and whether or not anything ever gets done.

So if you think about it, because we're governing in real time, I mean, tomorrow really matters to us. If we don't make a decision today, then three weeks from now, you might have children that don't get swim classes, the recreation centers don't open. Then the kids don't have anywhere to go. The schools don't work. The buses don't show up. And they're real life consequences.

In Washington, pick any issue. We could play a little game and you could pick any issue, and I'll tell you what, they started talking about that two years ago. There's been no solution. They don't even have a budget to get us into the next year. Well, it's hard to plan. So what happened in the last couple years in Washington, DC, because of this gridlock that occurred between the executive and the legislative branches of government, mayors who actually need Washington to be a partner, they're either a partner in a benign way, or they're a partner in a very strong, negative way, one way or the other, because it's a regulation that doesn't work, or it's a lack of funding that should be there, that wasn't there before, that you counted on.

And if you don't have anybody, then you can't plan anything. And when you can't plan anything, that's a partner that you can't rely on. So then you have to go on your own. So what has happened is cities have been forced into this innovation space, where we'll begin to spend time with each other,

trying to figure out the best way to solve problems that seem to be common to lots of people that live in cities across America. And the reason this is important to the country, not withstanding this recent election, 80% of the people in America live in cities. And those people are people that used to live in suburbia, and in some place live in rural. So this divide that the country says they had may be a theoretical one, but it doesn't exist from [inaudible 00:20:20] because everybody, even if they don't live in the city, they're coming into the city to work.

And so we have got to figure out how to take care of the needs of the people that are actually under our responsibility while they're there. And it would be much, much better if Washington and the states and the cities had a really great relationship, as opposed to this kind of ideologically bent view that Washington does one thing and the cities do other. The cities can only not do two things. We can't declare war and we can't sign treaties. Other than that, I mean, literally cities are capable of doing anything. And in some instances, some of the big cities on the security front, New York being the primary example, actually have more boots on the ground than some of the federal authorities.

So as the potential terrorist threats continues to become more manifest, as the public safety threats rise, as the needs for healthcare comes into more focus, those individuals, if you think about it, just think about the fight that we're going to have about the Affordable Care Act, whatever Congress does, that person who doesn't get something or does get something, is going to get that care on the streets of the city. And there's either going to be a hospital, a doctor, an emergency room, or there's not. If there's not, that person's going to be on the street and somebody is going to have to take them off of the street.

So mayors live in that space. That's why we're not that touched and excited about that rhetoric. We want them to say, whatever you're going to speak about, make sure you speak about it with responsibility and understand what the consequences of your actions are going to be and be prepared to be responsible for those consequences. If we can get into that kind of dialogue, most of the people that you know would be very tempered in the kind of thing that they create, whether it's education, healthcare, immigration, or housing.

Kelly Brownell:

When people in college, students in colleges and universities, think about the world of public policy, their minds normally gravitate toward federal government, less so states, and even less than that, city governments. But you seem to be making a strong argument that city governments can be a place where there's a lot of excitement opportunities to get done and really learning the nuts and bolts of governing.

Mitch Landrieu:

Well, that's a great question. I've thought about this a lot. I went to Catholic University of America in Washington, DC. I was a political science major, and truthfully, that's what I thought. I was in Washington DC. You're always thinking about the peace process in the Mideast. You're thinking about the [inaudible 00:22:42], to the east, or are you thinking about potential conflicts, you thinking about Syria, or are you thinking about who's going to be in a federal cabinet?

My experience, though, when I got back to Louisiana, and subsequently my experiences as being mayor, is that most of the action that matters to people on a day-to-day basis actually happens in the cities or in the counties. That is where the real governing takes place. And that's where most of the innovation is taking place. And what's happening that's very interesting, because there are a number of

platforms now where mayors across the world can talk to each other, is that mayors literally, not only across the country, but across the world, are beginning to communicate about things that are similar.

And what we have found is that things that might happen in Paris or in London are almost identical to the kind of things that might happen in Des Moines. Something as simple as how you pick up the trash. If you actually go over to Paris today, or you go to Rome, and you look at the kind of truck that's actually picking up the garbage, it's the identical kind of truck that's picking up the garbage in New Orleans. So your brain goes wait, I thought we had all these differences. We're across the water. We have different languages, we have different cultures, but in terms of the functioning of how you get water and how you get sewer and how you pick up the trash and how you put gas in a police car, it's pretty much the same.

And the mechanics of that, and the structure of that, and the financing of that, and the efficiency and the effectiveness of that, can all get better. Mayors just never really had any place to meet together, like congressmen meet or senators meet. That's changing now, because there are a lot of different organizations that are trying to get mayors together so they can share information and actually really kind of give to each other things that work, like a 311 system. I got mine from Boston. I went and visited Tom Menino. He took me around and showed me his customer service, told me all of his people. I went home and I told my people, "I want to buy one of those."

And they said, "What do you mean?" I said I want you to go figure out, go put it in a box, conceptualize it, write it out for me. Tell me how many people he has, tell me how many people are answering the phone. After they answer the phone, tell me how he gets it to his Department of Streets. After they get to the streets, tell me how long it takes to fix the street, and bring that box to me, and then plug it in our government and form it. That's what we did with NOLA For Life on a murder reduction strategy. And when you do that over time, and we work through it and we go through our successes and through our failures, and then we make it better, we can hand it off to the next city who has a similar problem that we have. And now that sharing platform is beginning to create and accelerate innovation much more quickly

Kelly Brownell:

Well, thank you. This has been incredibly inspiring, and I'm very much grateful for you joining us.

Mitch Landrieu:

It's great to be here.

Kelly Brownell:

So I've been talking today with New Orleans mayor, Mitch Landrieu. I'm pleased to say that Mayor Landrieu has agreed to join us for another episode of Policy 360. We will have that conversation, where we look at race and gun violence, for you next week until. Until next time, I'm Kelly Brownell.