

SOME OF OUR PROBLEMS ARE JUST UNFIXABLE

I MAY BE THE last publicly pessimistic person in Philadelphia.

It's the fashion, since the primary election victory of Michael Nutter, to stifle one's pessimism and berate any hint of it detected in others.

The chorus is everywhere: We've turned a page, reform is on the rise, and the only thing we have to fear is the fear of success.

It's as if the city were caught in some kind of EST coma, taking the corn-flake cure and chanting about the power of positive thinking. No one dares spoil the moment.

The closest thing to a caution comes from those who worry that our expectations may be too high, setting our triumphant reformers up for a fall.

Pity the poor Philadelphians. After being told for years that their low expectations have killed the city for a generation or two, now they've been whip-lashed by the new conventional wisdom telling them that their high expectations may kill it in the future.

But even this flaccid form of pessimism — the kind that says, gosh, our challenges are large and we better pace our expectations for improvement — is



MARK ALAN HUGHES

merely a device for helping Mayor Nutter get things done. The expectations argument is made by people who apparently believe that our biggest problems are fixable, if we just proceed in the right way: not too fast, not too slow, with

just the right expectations for our next mayor.

But our biggest problems are not fixable.

I almost put a comma at the end of that sentence and added a qualifying phrase like "as we currently define them" or "in terms of what a mayor can do." But I'm sticking with the period because no one is saying this clearly enough.

Our biggest problems ARE NOT FIXABLE.

Please don't take this as cynicism of which I must be cured. I'm not cynical — I'm realistic. A lot hinges on that distinction.

Treating our biggest problems as fixable is the most irresponsible politics I can imagine. It's the ultimate example of whistling past the graveyard, and it's pretty irritating when it's done by people whose own prospects are not really on the line.

Philadelphia is a city in which

perhaps half a million people are able to enjoy life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But there's another million or so Philadelphians whose prospects grow dimmer every year — half of whom are poor or nearly so, while the other half cling precariously to a living earned in a declining economy.

I'm fully aware of how well Philadelphia works for that happy half million. And Michael Nutter (forget the charade of November's general election) could be the best mayor any of them will ever have.

But much of this city operates as a warehouse of America's greatest failings. Chief among which is poverty. Hundreds of thousands of Philadelphians are mired in poverty and the related web of poor health, lousy education, no work and chronic violence. One in four Philadelphians is officially poor, which is very poor indeed: about \$20,000 for a family of four.

In this regard, the mayoral campaign of Rep. Chaka Fattah was focused on the right problem but the wrong job. (In fact, he already has the right job, and now we'll see how genuinely concerned he is about poverty in Philadelphia.)

The resources required to fix



YONG KIM/Daily News

those failings are so far beyond the capacity of Philadelphia (and the region and the state) that it is lunatic to act as if any mayor matters to our biggest problems.

YES, A MAYOR can help improve the quality of life for all citizens on every block. And Michael Nutter will get up every day and do that because it will soon be his job. That's why I volunteered for him during the primary, making a tiny contribution to the candidate I thought best.

But when quality of life starts

out so low, as it does for a million or so Philadelphians, the degree of improvement any mayor can make doesn't really matter. The mayor of New Orleans after Katrina and the mayor of Dresden after the allied bombing never had to state that painfully obvious fact.

Without the kind of lively economy that Philadelphia had 50 years ago, there is simply no way the city can be a place where these problems get fixed. Instead, we will continue to be a place where these problems get stored.

We've used lousy government as an excuse for as long as anyone can remember. If we could just fix our politics, we say, Philadelphia would prosper.

Now that we've elected the best possible mayor for Philadelphia, that excuse is about to vanish. And the unfixable problems will be clearer to everyone. ★

Mark Alan Hughes is the Robert A. Fox Leadership Fellow at Penn and a second-year architecture student at PennDesign.
E-mail: mahughes@sas.upenn.edu.

★ ★ ★

By **SHIRLEY KITCHEN**

AT LEAST THREE times a week, someone walks into my Philadelphia office seeking an application for a pardon, hoping to erase a criminal conviction from the public records.

I also meet with people whose felony offenses are still holding them back, years after they've paid for their crimes.

They're looking for a second chance. They've paid their debt to society and now want to improve their lives. Unfortunately, the law is punishing them for trying to do the right thing.

In an effort to clear the path to professional success for non-violent ex-offenders, Pennsylvania needs a "second-chance" law.

This legislation would give people who are convicted of a non-violent felony a second chance to enter the workforce, a second chance to obtain a good-paying

job, and a second chance to be productive members of society.

Currently, Pennsylvania does not have any law to regulate the way employers accept or deny employment because of a criminal background.

A second-chance law would

OPINION

prevent employers from holding against applicants certain types of offenses that have nothing to do with the job. It would also place a time limit on how long a felony conviction is held against an individual.

Other states are enacting similar legislation. In 2004, Delaware lifted a ban on professional licensing for people with felony convictions

if the conviction is unrelated to the profession or job.

National studies are showing that gainful employment is an essential element of the rehabilitation process. An Urban Institute report, Understanding the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry, notes that gainfully employed ex-convicts are less likely to commit another crime or return to prison.

And a two-year study from the Legal Action Center, After Prison: Roadblocks to Reentry, found that people with criminal records who are seeking reentry into society face numerous roadblocks, including state laws barring them from finding decent jobs or careers.

These roadblocks not only hinder an ex-offender's chances

of rehabilitation, but also raise the recidivism rate. Recidivism hurts communities and raises the city's crime rate. It also takes a toll on state tax dollars.

In 1971, there were 5,284 Pennsylvanians in state prison, costing about \$33 million. The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections spending for 2007-08 is expected to reach \$1.6 billion for 45,000 inmates — more than 30 times what we spent in 1971.

Pennsylvania prisons have become a revolving door of repeat offenders. Something more must be done to correct the problem, and building more prisons is not the answer.

Approximately 10,000 Pennsylvania inmates will be released from prison this year. They will

return to their communities in search of work. Without opportunities or job training, many of these non-violent ex-offenders return to criminal activity — and, subsequently, prison.

Recidivism is a major problem in Pennsylvania. Men and women are returning home from prison and can't get a decent job. Without a job, their chances of returning to their former criminal habits are very high.

Steady, well-paying employment is essential for ex-offenders to rejoin society and avoid a return to prison. That's why it is so important to give former offenders a better opportunity for a second chance. ★

State Sen. Shirley Kitchen (D) represents the 3rd Senatorial District in Philadelphia. She will be hosting a Second Chance Legislation Rally tomorrow at 10:30 a.m. at the Capitol Rotunda in Harrisburg. Call **215-227-6161** for more information.