

Comptroller Sees Financial Power as Tool to Advance Civil Rights

By **ALEXANDER BURNS** JULY 26, 2015

Photo



Scott M. Stringer, New York City's comptroller, at the Harlem Book Fair this month. He has been wooing community leaders.

[Scott M. Stringer](#), the New York City comptroller, grew animated as he addressed a late spring conference of executives from minority-owned businesses. Voicing exasperation with what he called the homogeneous hue of the financial sector, Mr. Stringer demanded that investment funds hire more women and nonwhite employees, starting with the city's youths.

"What you really want to do is take our kids, start them at the bottom — and now we're here," Mr. Stringer said, pausing to allow the musical allusion to sink in for those familiar with it.

"That's what the Drake song says," Mr. Stringer continued. "Start them at the bottom, and now we're here."

Mr. Stringer, 55, does not look like a politician who would invoke hip-hop lyrics in a discourse on economic opportunity. A former Manhattan borough president, Mr. Stringer jokingly refers to his own status as a bespectacled white guy, and laments that too many big companies are run by people "who look like me." (He sometimes adds: "With better suits.")

Yet since winning election to his job in 2013, after defeating former Gov. [Eliot Spitzer](#) in a Democratic primary, Mr. Stringer has sought to build a broader reputation for himself. After relying heavily on his

Manhattan base to defeat Mr. Spitzer, Mr. Stringer has wooed community leaders with determined intensity, visiting churches and business associations to advertise the inventive ways he has wielded his powers as comptroller.

Mr. Stringer has pursued that campaign, as a self-described social justice advocate, within the confines of a staid role: serving as the city's accountant and the steward of its nearly \$160 billion pension fund.

He has drawn the widest notice, so far, for [a series of financial settlements](#), totaling almost \$38 million, with people wrongfully convicted of crimes and the families of victims of abuse in the criminal justice system. This month, Mr. Stringer announced [a \\$5.9 million agreement](#) with the family of Eric Garner, the Staten Island man who died after being placed in a police chokehold last year.

But the comptroller has also attacked New York's low rate of contracting with female- and minority-owned businesses, and has talked in forceful terms about using the city's pension fund as a bludgeon to open up insular investment firms. If companies do not look "like the city we serve," Mr. Stringer told the group [Asian Women in Business](#) last month, "we just might not do business with them anymore."

Mr. Stringer has laid out a fiscal argument for his activities. Explaining why he had begun demanding diversity statistics from city investment funds, Mr. Stringer told one audience, "Diverse groups make fiscal decisions that are sound." The settlement with Mr. Garner's family, he said, reflected his desire to balance "the fiscal exposure of the city with the hope you can bring some relief" to family members.

"I believe we have broken ground in this area," Mr. Stringer said in an interview.

If Mr. Stringer has stated a fiduciary rationale for his agenda, the political logic is perhaps even clearer. His positioning reflects the shifting calculus for ambitious Democrats in a city fixated on issues of racial justice. Should Mr. Stringer run for mayor in 2017 or after, his fate may well rest with constituencies far outside his deepest well of support on Manhattan's Upper West Side, where he has steadily climbed the ladder of Democratic politics since his days as a state legislator.

The role Mr. Stringer is seeking to claim for himself may afford him new entree in those communities. With the Garner family and others, Mr. Stringer has avoided showy declarations of victory, typically

issuing news releases and allowing the recipients and their lawyers to stage news conferences separately. (With some constituencies, the settlements have been less popular; Mr. Stringer's agreement with the Garner family, for example, [drew a sharp rebuke](#) from the Sergeants Benevolent Association.)

But Mr. Stringer has assertively advertised his role in appearances around the city, arguing that the financial power of the comptroller's office has become a tool for advancing civil rights. In his speeches, one frequent refrain is that "there's only one color" capable of rectifying the city's social inequities.

"That color, my friends, is green," he said at a Caribbean American Heritage Month celebration in June.

Mr. Stringer disavowed any plans to challenge Mayor Bill de Blasio, a fellow Democrat, in 2017. But every comptroller for decades has run for mayor, sooner or later, and Mr. Stringer has been shoveling money into his campaign account. He reported collecting more than \$1 million so far for the 2017 elections and had nearly \$900,000 stockpiled. (Mr. de Blasio had a little more than \$3,000 in the bank; a spokesman said he had not yet begun to raise re-election funds.)

Mr. Stringer explored a campaign for mayor in 2012, before opting to run for comptroller instead. In 2009, he briefly considered challenging in a Democratic primary Senator [Kirsten E. Gillibrand](#), who was appointed to the Senate from the House of Representatives.

[Bonnie Wong](#), president of Asian Women in Business, said she saw Mr. Stringer making a concerted effort to reach beyond his roots as "an Upper West Side white liberal." She said Mr. Stringer had surprised some community leaders with his aggressiveness in tackling corporate diversity since moving up from the borough president's post.

"That position wasn't that powerful," Ms. Wong said. "It was mostly a figurehead, so he didn't do that much. But he's amazing. He's like the Energizer Bunny. He's all over the place. I see a changed person."

[The Rev. A. R. Bernard](#), a prominent Brooklyn pastor whose congregation Mr. Stringer recently addressed, said the comptroller talked there about his settlements for wrongful convictions. "In three minutes, he did pretty well," the pastor said.

Mr. Bernard said his bond with Mr. Stringer was a work in progress. "We've had a relationship for a while, and it's off and on," he said. "It's not, I would say, a deep friendship."

If Mr. Stringer is working intently to deepen his network of relationships now, the political task ahead of him may demand it. His race for comptroller in 2013 revealed a stark geographic and racial pattern to his political coalition: Mr. Stringer narrowly triumphed over Mr. Spitzer thanks to his overwhelming support in upscale Manhattan, as well as from whites and college-educated voters outside Manhattan, according to exit polls.

Mr. Spitzer, a better known candidate who spent millions from his personal fortune on television advertising, won over a majority of black and Hispanic New Yorkers, and voters making under \$50,000 a year.

Gregory Floyd, the president of Teamsters Local 237, said the agenda Mr. Stringer has pursued in office was forged in that primary. “I saw him come up with an agenda, come up with a mandate on what he needs to do as city comptroller,” Mr. Floyd said. “He has a vision. That’s what I saw come out of that.”

At times, Mr. Stringer’s articulation of that vision can sound like an implicit critique of Mr. de Blasio. The mayor has made economic inequality his signature issue, and presented himself as a lifelong activist and political organizer. Mr. Stringer tells his audiences that activism is important, but at some point it must give way to the hard use of government power.

Mr. Stringer also came out last week against Mr. de Blasio’s failed effort to limit the growth of the car-hailing service Uber.

His job, Mr. Stringer said at an event in June, was to translate “the marches and the speeches and the organizing” into “critical ways to change the economic power structure in this country.”

In an interview, the comptroller insisted he was not trying to draw a contrast in his rhetoric with any other politicians.

“I do not compare or contrast what I’m doing with anybody,” he said. “I just don’t.”

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