IN SESSION

Drawing on his Legal Education, Dallas Mayor Eric Johnson L’03 Relies on Data and Reasoning in Decision-Making

Despite the council-manager system of government in Dallas, in which the city manager is responsible for the day-to-day operations of the municipality, it’s not just ribbon cuttings and speeches for Mayor Eric Johnson L’03.

Johnson took office in July after winning a run-off election in June. He used a corporate analogy to describe his role and responsibilities as mayor, comparing city council to a board of directors with the mayor as the chairman. The policy-making power is with the council, or board. And a large amount of that power resides with the chair, or mayor.

“Under our rules,” Johnson said, “I, alone, create most of the committees. I select every chairman of every committee of city council, and I select those committees’ composition. It’s an important responsibility, too, because it’s how you determine the policy direction of the city. If no committee deals with arts and culture in your city, then there’s a good chance that you’re not really...
focusing very much on arts and culture in that city. Then who you put on that committee and who you put in charge is important. So, even in a council-manager form of government, the presiding officer of City Council has power.”

Johnson views arts and culture as important, but it’s just one item on his list of priorities.

He also plans a push for much-needed ethics reform. Most recently, a former Dallas city council member pleaded guilty in March 2019 to taking bribes from a real estate developer.

Johnson said he plans to advance ethics reform by bringing in experts and private citizens “to help us figure out how to make our city government more accountable to the people.”

Also on his agenda is the use of data in decision-making.

“I want to tie what we do and what we pay for to performance metrics and what actually has been shown to work. I don’t want to govern based on feelings and emotions,” Johnson said.

With budgeting having commenced in October for the fiscal year, Johnson said he hopes “the council and the city manager’s office got the message that we’re using data to inform our policies and that we are funding initiatives that have either been demonstrated to work or have some reasonable expectation of working. That means taking a fresh look at legacy programs, legacy contracts and even city departments.”

Johnson also plans to focus on education, workforce development and public safety and wants to improve aging infrastructure and mass transportation.

All are laudable goals. But the money to fund them, Johnson acknowledged, will be hard to find. About two-thirds of the budget already goes to public safety. And according to Johnson, the state legislature limits how much money can be generated through local property taxes, making budgeting a challenge.

But it’s a challenge Johnson has been preparing to take on after turning his attention to public service in college.

“I was always very motivated by the idea that there were people who lived in circumstances where, but for their Zip Code and where they were born, could compete at the highest level of industry, education, you name it. But those people were just not going to get that opportunity because of a very inequitable system that we have in many ways in this country,” Johnson said. “I almost had a chip on my shoulder about how many people I knew personally who would be doing more, had more to contribute to society, but probably never would because they didn’t have some of the opportunities I had been given. I want to scale up those kinds of opportunities for more people.”

One of those opportunities included attending Harvard as an undergraduate. And he took advantage, earning both the John Lord O’Brien and Stride Rite scholarships for his commitment to community service.

After an unsatisfying stint on Wall Street, Johnson went to work for his state representative in the Texas Legislature. He went to Princeton to earn a master’s in public policy, interrupted his studies to attend Penn Law, which gave him a public service scholarship, and then finished up at Princeton.

Johnson said he draws daily on his Penn Law training for his work at Dallas City Hall. “It is impossible, at this point of my life, to distinguish between how I think and how I approach problems from my legal training. It’s such a big part of who I am now. The way I approach everything I’m doing in the public sector context is informed by that rigorous, very tight logical reasoning that first year of law school drills into you. I learn and teach by asking questions. It’s amazing that Socratic method sort of seeps into you and becomes part of you.”