

## THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

### INDIA WALTON: AN INSURGENT CANDIDATE ROCKS THE ESTABLISHMENT

**LAURA FLANDERS:** What does it take to shift power? Who has it, how they wield it? What is done with it? In 2019, The Laura Flanders Show came to this place, Buffalo, to look at a whole network of grassroots movements that weren't just lobbying power, but considering running for it. When we interviewed those activists, one of them was named India Walton, a woman in her thirties, single mom, mother of four, nurse and community activist, here's India.

**INDIA WALTON:** So, I had a baby when I was 14. I dropped out to raise my son. I wound up getting my GED, and then when I was 19, I had a set of twins who were extremely premature, and they spent a long time in the hospital, and as a result of that experience, I really wanted to be a nurse. I went to nursing school, got my degree, and I went back and worked in the same NICU where my children were born.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** So where did you end up living once you got this degree? And what was your hope having gotten that far through medical school?

**INDIA WALTON:** I knew of the Fruit Belt from growing up. I knew that it was a place where housing was relatively affordable. I knew it was a place where there would still be a yard for my children to play in, and I wanted to be close to work. So, we started to look for homes in the neighborhood, and there wasn't a lot available.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** And why were the prices jacking up so quickly and so high?

**INDIA WALTON:** Well, because the medical campus, right, it's great. They're bringing in 12,000 employees a day. They have this great image. There's been all of this investment that's happening there, improvements in infrastructure, so there's really a lot of speculation about what this neighborhood is going to be five, 10, 15 years from now.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** In 2017, India Walton and her neighbors did manage to establish the city's first Community Land Trust, a nonprofit designed to give residents some control over their land.

**INDIA WALTON:** These are the first four city owned lots that we were able as an organization to acquire. Next summer, we're going to break ground on two single family

homes in partnership with Habitat for Humanity. So these are gonna be homes for qualified, low to moderate income home buyers that are going to be 0% for 30 years, and they're gonna be permanently affordable.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Even back in 2019, Walton was contemplating a run for office.

**INDIA WALTON:** I think that now is the time where we challenge who should be making policies, and it doesn't always have to be a person with a degree in political science or a lawyer. Moms know what we need. Nurses know what we need. Everyday people who live these lives and face challenges and overcome challenges, I believe are the ones who are best equipped to lead.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** So could it be a NIC unit nurse?

**INDIA WALTON:** It could definitely be a NICU nurse and probably should.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** You're thinking of running.

**INDIA WALTON:** I'm pretty solid in my decision. I'm going to.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** In the years since that interview, these two homes have been completed and occupied, here in the Fruit Belt and India Walton, she made a run for mayor of this city, winning the Democratic Primary and positioning herself to become the first African-American woman and the first Democratic socialist to lead this place. She was defeated in the general and now people are asking, *Did the Democratic establishment put up roadblocks to the Democratic process?* We don't know that for sure, but we do know that her race has changed this place. We had a talk with India Walton about what she's learned and about why her campaign has been so significant.

**INDIA WALTON:** When I make it to City Hall, I'm bringing all of you with me. The challenges we face as a community, the problems we solve together has all prepared us for this moment. As your mayor, I will remain loyal and committed to the city of Buffalo. I'm real. I'm resilient, and I'm ready. Are you ready?

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Talk about your decision to launch your campaign, 'cause I thought, when we last spoke, that we were talking maybe a year, two years, three years down the road, but you made the decision much sooner than that.

**INDIA WALTON:** Because I had been involved in so much advocacy over the years, not only as the Director of the Land Trust, but also working on the parking permit system, working on

criminal justice reform and things like that, the barrier to progress was oftentimes the city, and I don't mean the Common Council. The Common Council was always more receptive to things than the Administration, things like inclusionary zoning, things that we were promised were going to happen, and then the Administration just one eighted and went back on their word. And then last summer, seeing so many people out in the streets and again, having the door shut in our face, so we took all of our protestor friends, and we turned them into door knockers, and we worked really hard, and we won the primary.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Were you completely surprised, or were you expecting it?

**INDIA WALTON:** That night, I felt really good. I went around all day and the volunteers that were at the polls, I said, "We're gonna win. I have a feeling. I just know that we're going to win."

**CROWD:** India, India!

**INDIA WALTON:** It was still very shocking. My own mother told me that Byron Brown was pretty much unbeatable, and she didn't know how I was gonna do it, but she said, "If that's what you wanna do, I'll support you however I can."

**INDIA WALTON:** I hate to say, I told you so.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Most times, when somebody wins a primary, that's it. The other candidates concede. That's not what happened this time.

**INDIA WALTON:** Yeah, Buffalo, 65% Democrats. Republicans don't even mount a challenge. Most times your opponent concedes, and you begin to focus on transition, but instead, my opponent waged a write-in campaign. He even, at one point, was placed back on the ballot as an Independent candidate. But you know, we fought and we took it to court. We got him back off, which I think is the just thing to do. But he's running a serious write-in campaign.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Just to be clear, he wouldn't debate you.

**INDIA WALTON:** He wouldn't, he refused. He said it would be a dereliction of his duties as Mayor to spend any time debating me. But we debated after the primary, myself along with him and two other write-in candidates, all male, and there is a woman write-in candidate, but for whatever reason, she's not typically invited. But I didn't feel intimidated at all. I felt very confident. I felt like I knew what I was talking about, because I do. And he focused mostly on attacking me, rather than presenting his vision for the City of Buffalo, but I was able to talk about what it is that I want to do.

**INDIA WALTON:** When I'm Mayor, we're going to finally tackle public safety. Violent crime is as high as it's ever been. We are going to implement data driven, evidence-based programs that get to the root causes of violent crime.

**BYRON BROWN:** India Walton is completely wrong when she says she hasn't campaigned on defunding police. She said that she would cut \$7.5 million from the police department budget, which is clearly defunding police, and that would result in 100 less police officers on the streets of this community.

**INDIA WALTON:** The \$7.5 million dollars my opponent is referencing comes from a very good study that was put out by the Partnership for the Public Good that after a great audit of the police budget, suggests that positions can be eliminated through attrition, and the budget can be decreased by decreasing over-time and properly staffing the police department. That's not defunding. That's a responsible use of taxpayer dollars.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Right up until the end of election night, who would win the race remained unclear. I heard a wide range of perspectives from Buffalonians while I was there.

**CHRISTOPHER P. SCANLON:** Some of the policies she's discussed in public and also that are on her website, things of that nature, whether it's defunding the police, and now she's starting to say she doesn't want to defund the police, kind of using the semantics game, but I've been there and heard her use the term 'defund the police.' People don't want to see a reduction in the budget for the police department here. She talks about raising taxes. The big problem you see there is she claims to be a supporter of all the renters and people like that across the city, but who do you think that increase in taxes is gonna be passed down to? It's gonna be passed down to those renters, not by those landlords. So, we don't want to see things like that taking place. We think that the mayor has done a good job leading the city the past 16 years. We want to see him continue leading moving forward. During the primary, Ms. Walton received 11,000 votes. I mean, that's by no means, some mandate on her policies and her platform. That's a very, very, very small portion of the electorate and the population of the City of Buffalo. So I think now in the general election, you'll see a much larger turnout and voting set up that will be more indicative of how the city as a whole feels.

**LOUISA PACHECO:** I'd say there's a distinct contrast between the two campaigns. Mayor Byron Brown has been the mayor for 16 years. He has a strong machine. He's done a lot of development, but that development is specific, in specific corridors. There's tons of space where people have been priced out of their homes. And then when you look at India Walton's campaign, you have this, I would call it this hope on the horizon.

**DIVYA SUNDARAM:** The incumbent has been in office for 16 years, and we've seen how that has not led to the real change or investment that working people in Buffalo need. And India is a working person in Buffalo. She's a single mom. She's a nurse. She's an organizer. She has experienced so many things that people here in Buffalo have struggled with, herself, and so for her it's personal, and for our members it's personal.

**INDIA WALTON:** Hi!

**CONSTITUENT:** Welcome to my home!

**INDIA WALTON:** Thank you so much, it's a pleasure to be here.

**CONSTITUENT:** When I was 14, I was pregnant, and it was the dark ages. And my baby was whipped away from me, but then I found her, she found me, Diane, and then when Diane's grandson was born, you cared for him--

**DIANE, CONSTITUENT:** Yes, you did.

**CONSTITUENT:** And you made her dinner one night, and then he died. And then, a little while later, they had another baby, and they decided to do it right and come to Children's, so the baby wouldn't die. And you came when you heard that they were having another baby, and you held that baby and told her about her angel brother that you'd had the pleasure to take care of. So we loved you. All right, no more tears.

**DIANE, CONSTITUENT:** I'll never forget you.

**INDIA WALTON:** My top agenda item as mayor is to create a transparent and accessible city government. That's the first thing and after that, it's really doing everything that we possibly can to combat this issue of concentrated poverty that we have. Buffalo remains the third poorest city of this size in the country. We have a childhood poverty rate that is creeping toward 50%, and there are many, many ways that we can combat that, the first of which I believe is investing in affordable housing, investing in good living wage, green jobs and also just putting resources into neighborhoods and strategic planning at the neighborhood level and finding out what it is that people really need to thrive.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** So how do you do that? How do you do the transparency? Do you put all the bills on a website? You invite everyone into big meetings? You use a public assembly kind of a model, what?

**INDIA WALTON:** Yeah, I'm really into neighborhood assemblies. I am a fan of getting into the community, not expecting people to seek out city services for help, but city services coming to neighborhoods and to community groups and to Black clubs and saying, "What is it that you need and how can we help?"

**LAURA FLANDERS:** And the money, where does it all come from?

**INDIA WALTON:** I love that question. It's amazing that we can find money to build tall buildings that no one lives in, but when it comes to prioritizing the people, we can never seem to find the funding. The interesting thing is that the city of Buffalo doesn't apply for any federal or state grants outside of its entitlements. I look to Rochester, and knowing that Rochester received 12 million additional dollars for human services in the last decade. The City of Buffalo received zero. Why? Because they didn't apply.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Walton's policy platform was quite extensive, but some in the city seemed to believe that a working class outsider in her campaign couldn't possibly have come up with it themselves. Buffalo's hometown paper, "The Buffalo News," even went so far as to publish a piece accusing Walton of getting her ideas from a local nonprofit, which itself had received funding from George Soros. The billionaire philanthropist has become a major target of right wing conspiracy theories and antisemitism in recent years. I asked Walton about the non-profits she works with.

**INDIA WALTON:** Our platform is as comprehensive as it is, and as detailed as it is, because we all came together as the Our City Coalition prior to the creation of Our City Action, and had multiple community meetings and brought together neighborhood folks, stakeholders and our progressive think tank, Partnership for the Public Good, to be able to form a lot of these policies.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Well, that brings me to the next topic. We've established you're different. Your vision is different. You're doing your campaigning differently. How so? And how are you doing up against a party machine that has not given over power for the most part, that is still intact at a ward level, but with whatever morality is supporting your opponent, the write-in, Byron Brown.

**INDIA WALTON:** You know, when I say I lead with love, that is the difference in this campaign. We won the primary with an all-volunteer campaign staff. When people are out knocking on doors for us, it is because they actually believe in the vision and in the mission of this campaign, and you'll notice I speak of the campaign in terms of we and us, because it is a campaign of the multitudes in many, and we didn't seek out folks with political expertise. We just told everyone, "Bring whatever you have." I think the dedication and the authenticity in the

campaign is what drives people, what draws people and would have kept people so excited and so invigorating, 'cause this has been a long race.

**CROWD:** When I say, "India," you say, "Walton." India!

Walton!

India!

Walton!

India!

Walton!

**ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ:** Buffalo is making waves, has been making waves. Down in the Bronx and Queens, we see what y'all are doing and around the country, we see what y'all are doing, okay?

**INDIA WALTON:** When people talk about low voter turnout, it's because I've often felt there's not been many choices. Now you have an unprecedented opportunity to choose progress and change for the city of Buffalo, thank you.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Walton faced an uphill battle in Buffalo. Neither the State Party Chairman nor the Democratic Governor of New York would endorse her, even though she had won the Democratic Party Primary. Walton did, however, receive some very high level endorsements.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** We are like 12 days ahead of the election. Do you want to tell us what happened today, roundabout about six o'clock?

**INDIA WALTON:** Sure, I got a call from Senator Schumer. I picked up the phone, and he said, "Hello, is this India?" And I said, "It is," and he said, "Hey, India." I said, "Hey, Senator Schumer," and he said, "Call me, Chuck." And he said, "Listen, you've been running a great campaign, and keep up the good work. I'm endorsing you this evening," and shortly after, in bursts Jesse all red and grinning, and it had already hit the Buffalo news.

**JESSE MYERSON:** I think it makes a huge difference. Just a few days ago, the New York State Party Chair, Jay Jacobs, came under immense fire by comparing his endorsing India Walton to being as unthinkable as endorsing David Duke.

**JAY JACOBS:** Let's take a scenario, very different where David Duke, you remember him, the Grand Wizard of the KKK? He moves to New York. He becomes a Democrat, and he runs for mayor in the city of Rochester, which has a low primary turnout, and he wins the Democratic line. I have to endorse David Duke? I don't think so. Now of course, India Walton is in the same category.

**JESSE MYERSON:** Since then, there's been a great deal of questioning about why the state Democratic party has been so reluctant to back the Democratic nominee and stand with the Democratic voters, and Senator Schumer's endorsement really reverses that tide and shows that the state Democratic party really does see itself as accountable to the voters and to the Democratic, yeah, the grassroots.

**DRISANA HUGHES:** We work so hard. India has worked so hard. And it is disappointing that folks are afraid, or whatever reason, won't come out and support the Democratic nominee and to see from one of New York's oldest and most powerful leaders, that he gave her a strong endorsement today. That's what we spend all these hours for, and so we're really excited.

**INDIA WALTON:** I think that folks are really beginning to get to know me better. I think that we have done an excellent job of being proactive with our media in the last few weeks, and people are not believing the lies and the slander that's out there about me.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** So 11 days before election day here in Buffalo, India Walton was getting all sorts of exciting endorsements. Just yesterday, it was New York State Senator, Chuck Schumer, the leader of the Democrats in the US Senate. That was a big one. But today here in Buffalo, almost as important, Rasheed Wyatt, he's the first member of the Common Council, which is the Buffalo City Government here, and he's the Head of the Finance Committee. He's coming out for Walton too.

**RASHEED WYATT:** You know, I've been in office about seven years. And I think that this is probably the first time I'm doing something like this, and I don't do this knee-jerking. I don't just respond and do things because people want me to, I do them because it makes sense. I've seen how government has not worked for the people. I stood here, right across the street, because the current administration refused to listen and build to the will of the people. That's what this is about. This is not about one person dictating to others. It's about listening fervently and seriously and soberly to the will of the people. So here today, I stand in making an announcement for someone who I believe will listen to the will of the people, someone who will stand for the things that the Common Council has already stood for, like supporting Cariol's Law. The people wanted that. The Administration didn't. She supported inclusionary zoning. The people wanted that. The Administration didn't. She supported police reform. The people wanted that. So for that,

because she will listen to the people, and I'm trusting her word, because when we in these offices, they call us honorable. Well, I hope that you will be honest. I hope that you will have integrity, and I hope number one, you will listen to the people. So for that, I am endorsing, full-throatedly, Miss India Walton as our next mayor of the City of Buffalo.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** What makes you think this city right now, which for decades has been fairly forgotten, fairly allowed to run down, is ripe for the kind of change you promise.

**INDIA WALTON:** Yeah, the desire for change here is palpable. And we're seeing some great movements in labor here. The nurses at Mercy Hospital overwhelmingly voted to strike. We have Starbucks baristas who are organizing a union. People are just beginning to come to a moment of reckoning about the collective power of the worker and of poor people and the people of color, and for the first time in a long time, we are the minor majority.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Finally, you'd call yourself sometimes a Democratic Socialist and sometimes a socialist, which is it, and what does that mean? What do those words mean to you?

**INDIA WALTON:** Yeah, I am a member of Democratic Socialists of America, and that means that I prioritize people and planet over profits. That's the long and short of it. But, I decided to run as a socialist, because we've been under Democratic control for a number of years in the City of Buffalo, and a lot of people have not seen the material conditions of their lives change. So what makes me different than every other Democrat who's been a Democrat and been a Democrat and been a Democrat and working class folks have still been left behind. And the principles of socialism are that we all want safe, affordable housing, access to healthcare, a quality education for our children, clean air to breathe and clean water to drink, and I think that the more that we begin to have that conversation about what socialism actually is in America and what it is not, then we can finally begin to rebuild the proletariat and really rise up against the ruling class and claim what's rightfully ours, and that's just a life of dignity and of appropriate value for our work. And my campaign is an invitation to liberation. It's an invitation to love one another, and it is an invitation to begin building the Buffalo and the world that we want to see.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** If you don't win this time, will you run again?

**INDIA WALTON:** Jury's out on that. I do know that my life is never going to be how it was before. Who knows what that means. It may mean that I'll run again. It may mean that I'll run for something else, or it may mean that maybe my role is to mentor and to assist someone else in their quest for justice, so we'll see what happened.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Congratulations on coming this far.

**INDIA WALTON:** Thank you.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** And good luck to you.

**INDIA WALTON:** You know, I knew that this was gonna be an uphill battle, since the beginning. I'm proud of our staff, of our team. What I can guarantee you is that I will continue to fight for everyday Buffalonians who are struggling to make ends meet and live a quality life, and I am going to continue to work with sitting electives and cross sector coalitions to build the safe and healthy Buffalo that we all need and deserve.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Well that's almost it for our report from Buffalo, but I have a feeling that we'll be back. The campaign of India Walton, this NIC unit nurse to be mayor of her city has lots of lessons to teach. How do you shift power? The people in Buffalo are finding out. The nation is watching and so are we. For The Laura Flanders Show, stay kind, stay curious. Thanks for joining us.

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