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Larry Langford, Former Mayor of Birmingham Convicted of Bribery, Dies at 72

By Alan Blinder

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Larry P. Langford, a former broadcaster whose made-for-television tenure as the mayor of Birmingham, Ala., began with ambitions for a \$500 million domed stadium and came to an extraordinary end with his conviction on public corruption charges, died on Tuesday. He was 72.

His death was confirmed by his lawyer, Tiffany Johnson-Cole. While the cause was not announced, Mr. Langford had an array of health problems, including chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and heart failure, which in December prompted a judge to order his release from the federal prison where he was serving a 15-year sentence.

With a showman's touch and a penchant for defiance, Mr. Langford was a proudly unorthodox political figure in a state full of them. In and around Birmingham, where he was a public figure for more than four decades, he was regarded with an intriguing mix of admiration — for his creativity, zeal and unstinting confidence — and derision that flowed from his reputation as a politician who dealt in himself and spectacularly unrealistic ideas.

Indeed, Mr. Langford, who served as mayor from 2007 until he was convicted and forced from office in 2009, was but one of the Birmingham mayors who saw Alabama's largest city as an unrealized regional prize that could rival Atlanta. But Mr. Langford harbored the highest hopes of any elected official for the old steel hub.

When he ran for mayor, his campaign slogan was “Let's Do Something.” And when he made a pitch for the 2020 Olympic Games — an idea that a spokesman for the United States Olympic Committee said was “not anywhere on our radar screen” — he quoted Robert F. Kennedy: “Some men see things as they are and say, ‘Why?’ I dream of things that never were and say, ‘Why not?’”

It was all unsurprising for a man who, the editor of The Birmingham News had written, possessed a “Gatling gun of ideas.” But Mr. Langford's grandest dreams almost never came to pass.

Instead, a sweeping indictment largely defined the legacy of Mr. Langford, who was accused of accepting more than \$230,000 in bribes while he was chairman of the Jefferson County Commission. Less than a year after he was charged in 2008, a federal jury took less than half a day to convict Mr. Langford, by then Birmingham's mayor, of 60 counts.

Just before he reported to prison in 2010, he told *The Crimson White*, the student newspaper of the University of Alabama, that he was innocent and "the victim of my own government."

"I have tried my damndest to hate," Mr. Langford, who was black, said then. "I have looked at this case up and down, and I've tried to say to myself, 'Oh how easy this would be to just say this is still white folks just being white folks.' But that would be a disservice to whites or blacks who had nothing to do with it."

The United States attorney's office took a dim view of Mr. Langford's assessment and told the newspaper, "We and the jury obviously disagree with Mr. Langford's interpretation of the evidence."



Mr. Langford, center, in 2007 as he was sworn in as Birmingham's mayor.
Joe Songer/The Birmingham News, via Associated Press

Even once Mr. Langford was incarcerated, the merits of his prosecution and his continued imprisonment regularly bubbled up in the city he had left behind.

Larry Paul Langford was born in a public-housing project in Birmingham on March 17, 1946, according to the federal government. He enlisted in the Air Force, went to the University of Alabama at Birmingham on the G.I. bill and then worked in television. Mr. Langford's time as a

reporter, his lawyer wrote in a court filing decades later, led to an interest in politics.

He spent two years on the Birmingham City Council in the late 1970s but found his first sustained political success in Fairfield, a small city nearby. He was Fairfield's mayor for 14 years and then ran for the Jefferson County Commission, which elected him its president. He talked about running for governor, or even president.

In 2007, he defeated nine other candidates and was elected mayor of Birmingham with just enough support to avoid a runoff.

But it was Mr. Langford's conduct as a county commissioner that drew the attention of federal investigators, who concluded that he had accepted cash, clothing and jewelry for directing more than \$7 million in county bond business to an investment banker.

His conviction in 2009 automatically prompted his ouster as mayor and embarrassed the city, which was further stunned after it became public that Mr. Langford had won \$1.5 million through hundreds of electronic bingo jackpots at a supporter's casino.

He was married to Melva Langford, who survives him.

Randall L. Woodfin, the current mayor of Birmingham, urged that Mr. Langford "be remembered for his boundless ingenuity and as a fervent voice for the people."

Mr. Langford's death followed years of semiregular speculation, some of it fanned by the former mayor himself, that the politician-turned-prisoner was nearing the end of his life.

"I'm dying and just was refused a compassionate release after the prison here, the probation in Birmingham and the warden all approved my being allowed to go home to die," Mr. Langford told The Birmingham News in 2013.

Mr. Langford's supporters held sporadic rallies to seek his release, and Birmingham's politicians lobbied federal officials on Mr. Langford's behalf for years.

In November 2018, the Bureau of Prisons again denied Mr. Langford's bid for release. Then, in late December, the judge who had sentenced Mr. Langford acted on a request from the federal government and changed the former mayor's punishment to time served, in part because prison officials considered him "debilitated."

Mr. Langford returned to Alabama on Dec. 29, almost nine years after he predicted that he would die in prison.