New England Journal of Public Policy

Volume 3 | Issue 1 Article 2

1-1-1987

Editor's Note

Padraig O'Malley
University of Massachusetts Boston, padraig.omalley@umb.edu

Editor's Note

Padraig O'Malley

Less than ten years ago, the Sun Belt states were the focus of the kind of excessive attention we have come to associate with our propensity to assign cause, time, place, and date to account for little-understood social phenomena. The decline of the Northeast was virtually irreversible, according to the new wisdom, the rise of the West and Southwest obviously inevitable. Change had more to do with "the mysterious hand of Providence" or the caprice of oil sheiks than with policy—we prefer being comforted, it seems, to being informed.

Explanations of our condition that reinforce our perceived beliefs satisfy our need for appearing to be in control: the supercilious and the arcane are easily interchanged; the calculus of change held to be discrete rather than continuous; and the affirming myths of the past, whether they refer to the seemingly doomed legacy of the Red Sox or the genesis of the social order, are paid their due homage, as if homage will somehow dissipate the impact of their anticipated consequences. In short, culture, rather than policy, is seen as the handmaiden of social change.

This issue of the *New England Journal of Public Policy* argues otherwise. It examines how change, despite its uneven impact and uncertain direction, can be planned for and managed. Thus, the conclusion that Irving H. Bartlett draws from Daniel Webster's attempt, in 1850, to articulate a view of the Union that was reassuring is especially germane to public-policy issues in which so-called imperatives of culture are held to take precedence over considerations of community and equity: "There are times when the culture changes, when traditional values and institutions are no longer adequate to the moral and political demands of the present, when something new is demanded to save the culture from itself." Webster's message in 1850, that the Union was sound, and that the people's role in a rapidly changing democratic society was consistent with their historical legacy, was comforting but wrong.

In "Originally from Dorchester," her portrait of a neighborhood that wrestled—and continues to wrestle—with problems of race, ethnicity, cultural values, economic development, and mobility, Kathleen Kilgore captures the nuances of the small gesture, whether of defiance or gentility, that reveal the underside of social conflict more eloquently than databases or court findings. "The neighborhood," Kilgore writes, "weakened and aged, and forcibly resisted change." But it then began to adapt, the influx of the young and the upwardly mobile providing a lifeline that facilitated a process of renewal and accommodation, in which, in the best sense, diversity became the hallmark of opportunity, enriching rather than diminishing, and community and cooperation developed into an antidote to social competition and class/racial conflict. Uneasy truces can develop into accommodations of self-interest.

Padraig O'Malley is a senior associate at the John W. McCormack Institute of Public Affairs.

Perceptions of self-interest were, according to Thomas J. Anton and Darrell M. West, a major reason for the overwhelming rejection of the Greenhouse Compact—the $250 million industrial development project to revitalize Rhode Island's economy—by the voters of Rhode Island in June 1984. In a study that complements Ira Magaziner's analysis of the Compact in the winter/spring 1986 issue of the journal, the authors find that more important than the issue of trust, which Magaziner had identified as the most salient determinant of the negative vote, were questions relating to the substance of the plan itself and to elitism—the average voter felt that he had little to gain from its approval and that his interests were not represented on a commission dominated by the state's elite. The Strategic Development Commission, in short, was perceived to be either insensitive or hostile to the interests of the average person. In addition, the Greenhouse Compact appeared out of scale and out of place for Rhode Island, reflecting values wholly out of touch with the personalized localisms of the state's residents. The lesson: a public that is called upon to approve an economic development plan must find it nonthreatening, not just in a tangible economic sense but in the larger, intangible sense of the public's own self-perceived capacity to assimilate the changes the plan will bring with it. In short, development plans must cater to the public's predilection for incremental rather than comprehensive policymaking.

Jeanne H. Armstrong and John R. Mullin address different aspects of economic change: the matching of industry with communities, and the matching of people with industry. Armstrong and Mullin's study complements Sum et al.'s article on poverty in New England in the summer/fall 1986 issue of the journal. Both analyze the uneven impact of the Massachusetts economic miracle; the former in relation to mature-industry communities that have had to reindustrialize, the latter in relation to the distribution of income. Whole regions of Massachusetts, especially the Northern Tier along Route 2, southeastern Massachusetts, and the Blackstone Valley, have benefited very little from the state's spectacular economic turnaround. These communities, some of which are severely depressed and in the throes of what appears to them to be terminal economic decline, face tough choices that must incorporate incremental change into a more comprehensive policy framework. Armstrong and Mullin provide such a framework.

Two key components of a community's capacity to reindustrialize are the status of its work force and its willingness to draw on the resources that it already has. Increasingly, given the rate of technological change and the more mobile nature of economic activity, the labor force emerges as the pivotal element in sustaining economic development. In other issues of the journal, articles have drawn attention to the relationship between the level of prosperity in Massachusetts and the availability of an educated labor force, a labor force that will grow slowly, if at all, between now and the turn of the century. One of the major constraints on further growth will be tight labor markets pushing up wage rates and reducing competitiveness: thus, the urgent need to enlarge the available supply of quality labor through education and retraining programs, especially for adult learners. Elizabeth F. Fideler argues that despite lip service to the importance of education, regional policymakers, including those in Massachusetts, have been remiss in developing adult-education programs and coordinating the activities of the programs that do exist. Unless Massachusetts and the region as a whole recognize that the future of the New England states depends primarily on the adaptability of the existing labor pool—whether its members are employed, underemployed, or unemployed—to the circumstances of shifting product markets, their economies will not sustain themselves, and the growth predicated on new skills will be retarded.

The lag implicit in Fideler's analysis between the need for an adjustment in response to change in the labor market and the critical mass which that need must acquire before it is acted on is addressed more explicitly by both Joseph A. McHugh and Charles H. W. Foster. McHugh analyzes the benefits of federal financial management controls that were developed in response to the public's increasingly vocal insistence on the elimination of waste and inefficiency in government—"doing more with less" became more than a pious platitude by the end of the 1970s—and suggests ways in which state government can duplicate the federal government's success. Foster, on the other hand, describes how the Fund for New England, an environmental philanthropy, came into being in response to persistent demands for action across conventional political environments in regard to the management and advancement of the region's natural resources and environment.

Finally, Shaun O'Connell's essay, "Remembering Who We Were," gives a Boston perspective to our search for self, identity, and possibility. For its writers, he concludes, "Boston remains a vibrant state of mind, an occasion for sustained verbal reflection, a site of personal and cultural conflict, a city still in the making." And while there may be anxieties "beneath its high-tech prosperity, its high-style glitz and its political clout . . . over the separations between the people we once were and those we have become or those we *might* become"—that "might" will be immeasurably strengthened if policymakers adhere to policies that enhance philosophies designed to improve individual self-esteem, promote community, and open up new vistas for self-realization. ❧

We regret the omission of an appropriate attribution in the last issue of the journal. Margaret C. O'Brien's "Demographic Trends in Boston: Some Implications for Municipal Services" was originally prepared for the Boston Municipal Research Bureau and was delivered to its board at a retreat in November of 1985. Our apologies.