

New England Journal of Public Policy

Volume 5 | Issue 2

Article 2

6-21-1989

Editor's Note

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Recommended Citation

O'Malley, Padraig (1989) "Editor's Note," *New England Journal of Public Policy*. Vol. 5: Iss. 2, Article 2.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol5/iss2/2>

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Editor's Note

Padraig O'Malley

Decades beget catchwords to describe them, but the 1980s may defy our best efforts to capture them in one pithy phrase. For a time it appeared that the “me generation” would suffice, but this was essentially an introspective generalization drawing on a parochial perspective: America preoccupied with America rather than with the broader world beyond its borders.

Perhaps the explosion of the Challenger on that bright Tuesday morning in January 1986 has much to do with our self-doubt, with our realization that while we might still regard ourselves as being first among equals, we were no longer preeminent. For the Challenger catastrophe was a symbol both of the immense technological forces we had mastered and of their mastery over us. It made us a witness to our own vulnerability, reminding us of our limitations — limitations from which we have sought to free ourselves but which always elude our attempts to do so, intimating the mortality not just of our own lives but of whole generations and the ideas that give them vision.

The old order is dead, the “evil empire” transmogrified into perestroika and glasnost; Poland and Hungary lifted the iron curtain and marched to the beat of their own drummers; China opened up for one brief shining moment and closed in on itself with the slaughter in Tiananmen Square; arms control agreements signed, nuclear weapons actually destroyed, the Cold War suddenly an anachronism. Japan emerged as the world's dominant economic power, the European Economic Community moved closer to a single market of 320 million people, the world economy to the globalization of the marketplace, and the United States fed itself on public voyeurism and budget deficits that bled future generations of their heritage.

Which brings us to this issue of the *New England Journal of Public Policy* and to questions related to the social, economic, political, or ideological parameters that provide the context in which policy decisions are made and implemented, either proactively or reactively, or in which the institutional or administrative structures themselves are capable only of providing obsolete answers to convenient questions.

In “The Past as Prologue?” Tom Ferguson, using campaign financing data, argues convincingly that the necessity for the Bush administration to hold together the coalition of two blocs pulling in different directions — Ferguson loosely categorizes them as the “protectionists” and the “multinationals” — will lead to piecemeal, often contradictory

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policies on a whole range of vital issues, whether on the foreign policy front in response to Gorbachev's initiatives ("The plain fact," Ferguson writes, "is that despite détente's ionospheric ratings in the Gallup poll, leading parts of American multinational business and the military are strongly opposed"), or in relation to the budget deficit, aid to Poland, the savings and loans bailout that will continue to be fractured and lack ideological coherence. "While the Bush administration" he concludes, "may finally embark on a 'speak loudly and carry a small stick' policy designed to mark the departure from the early years of the Reagan era, the current situation . . . contains the seeds of a policy failure of historic proportions."

On a proactive note, Susan Sinclair in "Growth Management in the 1980s" analyzes state legislation for managing growth in six states — Florida, Maine, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Georgia. While environmental issues dominated the debate a decade ago, states are now addressing a broader range of growth-related problems. "Rapid growth and development," she writes, "have brought unanticipated and unplanned-for consequences such as lack of affordable housing, infrastructure deficits, and loss of community character," problems that "threaten to erode the states' quality of life and jeopardize future economic development." As a result, initiatives are now more accurately described as "growth management" rather than "land use control programs." They have given birth to a new generation of growth management legislation that employs comprehensive planning at all levels of government as its primary strategy.

In "The Problems of Rural Reindustrialization," Jeanne Armstrong and John Mullin focus on the town of Monroe, Massachusetts, as an example of the plight of a mill town in New England that loses its industrial base. Nor is Monroe unique. There are, they write, "several hundred small [New England] villages and towns" that "are in serious economic trouble." The authors posit that the problems facing communities like Monroe cannot be solved locally but require "a strong . . . and comprehensive effort on the part of state government." In the absence of such an effort, Armstrong and Mullin conclude, "these areas are likely to take on the characteristics of the poorest parts of Appalachia."

Sandra Elman, in her article "The Academic Workplace," looks at change in a different environment. A December 1988 conference on faculty work life, jointly sponsored by the New England Resource Center for Higher Education and the New England Board of Higher Education, addressed the increasing dissatisfaction among college and university faculty with the quality of their workplace. Perhaps the most unanimous conclusion reached by the conferees was that "academic leadership should seek greater institutional synergy . . . by encouraging and facilitating greater collaboration and teamwork among faculty both on individual campuses and interinstitutionally." It would appear that the chasm in many colleges between the kinds of professional work faculty engage in and the work they are rewarded for is deepening.

Shaun O'Connell, in "Thinking of England," examines the current state of "purely English" literature and concludes that "there will be worthy books on the critical, if not terminal, condition of England." In "The Happy Accident," Robert Manning's delightful memoir of his early newspaper days in Binghamton, New York, we are brought back to an earlier and seemingly more innocent time when New England — and America — stood on the threshold of change. The moral of going home, it seems, is that as much changes, much never changes — something we should perhaps remember in these last feverish days of the nineteen eighties. 🐼