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Editor's Note

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Padraig O'Malley

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CENTRAL TO THE EVOLUTION of public policy, since all subsequent processes flow from it, is the question of problem identification—or, more broadly, the question of definition. The importance of definition derives not only from the need to address the “right” problem but from the often greater need not to address the “wrong” one, since the subsequent misallocation of resources can alter the nature of the problem itself. More is not always better, whether in reference to federal largesse, nuclear power generating capacity, or the length of the school day. In fact, as the articles in this issue of the *New England Journal of Public Policy* demonstrate, more is often worse.

Bernard Gifford argues that the widespread inefficacy of educational reform can often be attributed to the failure of policymakers to “make the transition from macro- to microanalysis,” to move from a focus on “the larger obstacles impeding the schools’ capacity to serve all of their pupils effectively and efficiently” to a focus on “the specific problems that require the application of specific policy initiatives for their solutions”—in short, the failure to define precisely what is to be “solved.” He contends that this failure is often due to the tendency to substitute the *description* of unacceptable conditions in a policy area for a specific *definition* of the problem to which a new policy initiative is to be applied.

Gifford’s argument is reiterated in the Ferbers’ analysis of the fiscal condition of New England cities (the explosion of federal grant programs in the sixties in the absence of a national urban policy, they conclude, created conditions that subsequently undermined rather than ameliorated the cities’ capacity to stand on their own fiscal feet) and in Charles Komanoff’s analysis of the cost crisis in the nuclear power industry (the failure, he argues, perhaps even the intentional unwillingness, of the industry to identify the real reasons for skyrocketing nuclear plants costs—the safety controversy and technical deficiencies—led utilities to increase their investment in nuclear power facilities when, in fact, such investment should have been curbed). Even George Higgins takes benevolent umbrage at Donald Hall’s reference to him in the journal’s first issue as one of the *Globe*’s resident Hibernians.

A problem, of course, must be defined in terms of the constraints that give it context. Formulating a public policy agenda for the future requires an understanding of how social, economic, political, and organizational variables interact in the present. Thus, in the case of New England cities, the Ferbers maintain that

in view of their present financial limitations, city governments must redefine their priorities in the administration of public services; Komanoff cogently makes the case that the nuclear power industry must abandon the practices it has hitherto employed to suggest that nuclear power is competitive with other energy-generating sources—especially the practice of expressing costs in terms that have accounting but not economic meaning; and Gifford concludes that a shared understanding of the teacher-student interaction is prerequisite to a restructuring of the teaching occupation.

4 Robert Morris takes the matter of definition one step further, arguing that attitudinal changes among individuals and structural changes in the economy require a redefinition of the context in which we view problems, particularly those problems that pertain to welfare and social services. One reason for this shift in attitudes is dissatisfaction across the political smorgasbord with the results of programs that have evolved over the last half-century: many problems for which long-term solutions were developed and which are now administered by entrenched bureaucracies were misdefined to begin with. Unless we identify the nature of the changes which pose basic decisions about the kind of society we envision for ourselves, we will increasingly view public policy issues in wrong or inadequate contexts and hence misdefine the problems themselves.

Four of the articles—those written by the Ferbers, Robert Morris, Bernard Gifford, and Robert Peterkin—were first presented at the conference on “The Urban Condition in the Year 2000,” held at the University of Massachusetts at Boston this past June. The conference was cosponsored by the John W. McCormack Institute of Public Affairs and the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges. Richard Hogarty’s review of recent books on the future of cities complements these articles—in New England we sometimes forget that three-quarters of our population—the same fraction as in the U.S. population as a whole—lives within the urban environment, or Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas.

Marcy Murningham’s analysis of what occurred when a state and federal court attempted to disengage from active jurisdiction over two Boston public systems illustrates at the micro-level what other articles illustrate at the macro-level, namely, when institutions or governmental units become dependent on other institutions or governmental units—often as the result of well-intentioned policy initiatives—their capacity to discharge their functions on behalf of the public interests they serve may be severely undermined. George V. Higgins contributes to the series on the New England state of mind, identifying “a New England code of acceptable behavior” whose hallmarks are discretion “and a sense of decency, still powerful enough to prompt even those flouting it, and getting caught, to feel a sense of guilt.” Future issues will continue to explore whether there is, in fact, such a thing as a New England “value system” that reflects itself in a special set of attitudes and perspectives and that speaks with a distinct voice, whether in literature or public affairs or town meetings, making New England different from the rest of the country.