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Regionalism: The Next Step

Ian Menzies

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Although the New England states have, over the years, been regionally cooperative, they have not formally advanced the process since the establishment of the New England Governors' Conference in 1937. There is still no regional government in New England; no body politic that can enact regionwide laws; no organization authorized to perform regionwide planning, or with the power to regulate or direct growth and development or manage natural resources. There isn't even a public forum or assembly where such issues can be discussed. This article reviews the history of regionalism in New England and proposes that the six states develop a more mature approach to complex regional issues by forming a New England Council of Governments.

Calvin Coolidge, as far as I'm aware, never said much about regionalism. Some say he never said much about anything, but he understood very well the spirit of recalcitrance and contrariness embodied in the New England psyche, which, on occasion, he reflected with a wry wit. For example, we have the story of the day Coolidge and some companions were standing beside a bridle path in Montpelier. A state senator who never agreed with anyone or anything happened to ride by. Said Coolidge, turning to his friends: "Must bother him to be going the same way as the horse."

Contrariness, a New England characteristic intimately familiar to the Yankee Coolidge, has, over the years, taken many forms, among them a disinclination by the six New England states toward any extended degree of regional cooperation. Although formal efforts to promote regionalism in New England go back some fifty years, overall results have been less than distinguished. And, curiously, little has been done to review or evaluate those efforts with an aim toward overcoming limitations through an improved process.

Yet how can New England continue to enjoy both prosperity and livability without a far more effective, systematized regional approach to growth, planning, increasing densities, pollution, transportation, conservation of natural resources, and the internal distribution of people, services, and jobs? But first, it would be helpful to agree on what is meant by *regionalism*, that is, as the term applies to a group of states rather than to divisions within a single state.

Throughout this article, regionalism is considered a positive thing. It is defined simply as the concept that those states which share a geographic identity may also

share certain economic, social, cultural, and political characteristics which, through cooperation, they can exploit to their mutual benefit. It is also reasonable to say that the six New England states do form a fairly natural homogeneous grouping; that as a whole this fact has been accepted by New Englanders; that efforts to think and act regionally have improved in recent years; but that despite this progress there is, as yet, no formalized regional agenda, assembly, or legislative process.

One would think that the need to formalize the regional process would be self-evident. More self-evident, however, has been the lack of cooperation among the states; a lack of cooperation that at times has devolved into bizarre bickering. Some may remember the Battle of the Bottle back in the late 1950s, when Bay State tax men would spy on New Hampshire's tax-free liquor stores, identify Massachusetts buyers through the use of binoculars and hand signals, then nail Bay Staters for unpaid liquor taxes as they reentered their home state. Updated versions of this border tax war continue. Recently Massachusetts revenueurs went after big-ticket hard goods dealers who have warehouses in Massachusetts but retail outlets in New Hampshire, where, free of a sales tax, they can undersell their Massachusetts competition.

Taxes, indeed, have been a major aggravation between the New England states for years, and not just sales taxes. Income taxes also have caused friction, because some states have them (Massachusetts and Rhode Island), while others don't (New Hampshire and Connecticut). The result, according to the Massachusetts Department of Revenue, is that some Bay Staters who live along the border but work in Connecticut or New Hampshire have avoided paying taxes to their home state, an evasion unfair to their fellow citizens. That evasion, however, may now end, or at least be reduced, as early this year tax officials of nine Northeastern states agreed to compare their computer files in an effort to track down tax cheats—a good illustration of voluntary regional cooperation.

But there are still many unnecessary conflicts fed by that old New England characteristic that some call rugged individualism and others call illogical contrariness. Why, for instance, do the New England states still have different rules and regulations for the taking and selling of certain shellfish? Why different legal lengths for flounder, cod, and haddock? And the variation in mesh size from state to state is not conducive to the preservation of immature fish. Positive steps were taken in 1984 to standardize minimal lengths for lobsters, soft-shell clams, and striped bass, but more has to be done, especially in the interests of conserving overfished species, such as the food-important black-back flounder. Surely the rules governing the taking of fish and shellfish, inshore and offshore, should be the same.

It's been much the same with the drinking age, with one state setting it at eighteen, another at nineteen, and yet another at twenty-one. The outcome was predictable. Thousands of teenagers, seeking drinking legality, simply drove across borders, thus increasing the risk of highway tragedy. Not until quite recently, pressured by the campaign of Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), did the New England states make a serious regional effort to agree on a uniform drinking age of twenty-one. Vermont, however, as of late 1985, was still a holdout, with the *Boston Globe* reporting thousands of young people flocking into Vermont on weekends to drink or buy beer or liquor, or do both. Vermont is finally expected to fall into line with the other New England states this year under pressure from the federal highway administration,

which has threatened to withhold highway funds from states that fail to raise the drinking age to twenty-one by October 1986.

New England also has failed miserably in maintaining, let alone improving, interstate transit, where the need for collaboration and a united front is a prerequisite. Think, for instance, how airline congestion could be eased both in Boston and New York with the alternative of fast rail. New bullet trains wouldn't be necessary. What is needed is completion of rail electrification between New Haven and Boston, along with some new track, plus track straightening, completion of an updated signal system, and, perhaps as much as anything, a single routing authority throughout the length of the line, which would permit three-hour travel time between downtown Boston and downtown New York, thus providing a service that would be comparable to current fast Metroliner service between New York and Washington. As of today it looks as though Montreal's far-sighted, big-project mayor, Jean Drapeau, may successfully promote three-hour fast rail between Montreal and New York before we here in New England have three-hour rail between Boston and New York, even though the distance from New York to Montreal is two hundred miles farther.¹

Fast rail between Boston and New York is the only way to reduce steadily worsening delays at Boston's Logan Airport, both in the air and on the ground. Logan's multiplying problems, which, if allowed to continue, could eventually force a more distant relocation of the airport, are directly tied to the fact that the Boston-to-New-York air corridor is the busiest in the nation, with an incredible volume of 4.4 million passengers annually. Despite this, the New England states haven't done nearly enough to push for a competitive transit alternative to the New York shuttle. Yet a business person, using three-hour rail, could, on many days, make it from downtown Boston to New York faster than taking the shuttle would permit, a situation that will worsen with mounting need for greater airport security.

There is also a major need, especially in the northern half of New England, to restore passenger rail to and through Boston to the south. In the densifying Northeast corridor, the future for buses and cars will worsen, the result of mounting gridlock in and around the region's cities. We are running out of capacity on our highways as well as space to park at journey's end. Obviously New England should stop thinking highways, even air, and instead think fast rail for both people and freight, thus preserving airports for national and international travel. Fast rail is a regional challenge that has been sidetracked by the New England congressional delegation, governors, and state legislatures ever since it was derailed by the governor of Connecticut in 1971 because the proposed track realignment would have bypassed several coastal communities then, and still, receiving service. And the way not to go, yet the way we're going, is to build ever longer and heavier trucks (already up to fifty tons), along with smaller and smaller cars—a suicidal policy. The day when entire families (five or six people at a time) can be wiped out is already upon us.

Collective advances have been made on long-range power needs, some involving Canada, as well as on the need to protect groundwater, which doesn't observe state lines. And positive steps—including badgering the Reagan administration—have been taken by the governors to find a compromise solution to the deadly dangers of acid rain. But virtually no progress has been made in selecting a regional site or sites for disposal of low-level nuclear waste, which New England produces in greater volume per capita than any other region.

The picture is clear. There is no formal regionalism, with a couple of exceptions. Most of what happens results from a handshake between the New England governors, or, as in the case of acid rain, because the issue beats on the heads of New Englanders and kills the fish in their ponds and the trees in their forests. There are, it's true, literally scores of organizations that have New England-wide interests in special areas such as conservation, preservation, energy, medicine, water, and business, but in the final analysis, in seeking regional unification, such organizations can operate only on a state-by-state basis.

There is no regional government in New England; no body politic that can enact regionwide laws; no organization authorized to perform regionwide planning or with the power to regulate and/or direct growth and development or manage natural resources. There isn't even a public forum or assembly where such issues can be discussed; where a consensus and constituency for regional proposals could be developed and an agenda generated. Instead what we have are special-interest regional organizations, which, through congressionally approved compacts between two or more of the New England states, have been delegated powers to form interstate agreements. Existing compacts currently cover such areas as higher education, public safety, flood control, and prisons.

The best known and perhaps most beneficial of these compacts is the one which, in 1955, established the New England Board of Higher Education and which was ratified by all six states and the U.S. Congress. It is the purpose of the board to advance, develop, and direct programs and activities that increase higher educational opportunities and that improve efficiency in the use of resources among New England's academic institutions.² Since 1957, the board's Regional Student Program has made it possible for more than fifty thousand New England students to attend out-of-state public colleges and universities in the region at reduced tuition rates for specialized degree programs not offered by in-state public institutions. Through this program, for instance, a student in Maine, a state without a medical school, can attend one of the New England state universities that has a medical school, at considerable savings over private school costs. Currently, some five thousand students, each realizing an average tuition savings of more than \$2,000, are enrolled in this regional program. It is the largest such program in the nation.

It would be foolish, however, to take the board's continued existence for granted. In 1982 Connecticut threatened to pull out of the compact—ostensibly to cut costs—but Governor William A. O'Neill strongly supported continuation, pointing out that “More, not less, regional collaboration is needed in behalf of New England's growing knowledge-intensive economy. . . . Board services link the research and manpower training capabilities of higher education to economic development.”³

The New England Board of Higher Education, headed by John C. Hoy, best represents the type of effective, publicly beneficial organization that can be produced by, as well as serve, regionalism. Its limitation is that it deals with only one facet of New England life, albeit a critically important one: education. In fact, however, the board has interpreted its mission of education liberally, and, quite sensibly, as the only broad-based regional organization around, has expanded its activities to regional economic studies such as job training and the New England economy per se.

It doesn't have to seek far for justification. Higher education is one of the most important industries in New England. The annual expenditure of the region's 260 col-

leges and universities is approximately \$4 billion, and they generate about \$10 billion in revenues, which is close to 8 percent of the gross regional product. Currently under way is a two-year study of the region's nine medical schools and teaching hospital centers which aims to evaluate their role in the regional economy and their importance to the region's developing biomedical, biotechnical industries. The study is being chaired by Dr. James M. Howell, senior vice president and chief economist of the Bank of Boston who, although a Texan, knows more about the New England economy than anyone else. In his view, the importance of these nine academic regional health centers is absolutely pivotal to the long-term competitive strength of New England.⁴

68 One other effective regional organization, although in the private rather than public sector, is the New England Council, which is made up of 1,200 member firms—banks, manufacturing companies, utilities, and so on—and employs over 1 million New Englanders. Over the years, the council has both contributed to a positive investment climate in New England and encouraged general economic growth. Although self-interest lobbying hasn't always endeared it to liberals, the council has taken broader stands as, for instance, in 1982, when it sought to set up a New England Assembly, a sort of Aspen Institute-type think tank to focus on New England issues. Curiously, to outsiders at least, the New England Council and the Massachusetts High Technology Council, representing 150 member firms with 240,000 employees—130,000 of them in Massachusetts—have not seen fit to collaborate. The High Tech Council, the newer group, obviously feels its interests are best served through independent representation and, as of now, on a nonregional basis.

This brings us to the two umbrella political organizations which currently offer the only forums in which to discuss and act, in a limited sense, on a broad spectrum of regional issues. One is the New England Governors' Conference, established in 1937, and the other is the much lesser known, more recent Caucus of New England State Legislatures, formed in 1978. The Governors' Conference, which meets four times a year, has a most competent but small staff of fifteen, headed by William Gildea, and a current annual budget of \$858,000 (based on \$75,000 per state plus a per capita contribution). The conference staff, based in Boston, does draw on various state agencies throughout the region for help in research and analysis.

Areas of interest currently under discussion by the governors include energy, fish (the boundary dispute with Canada on Georges Bank), acid rain, groundwater, low- and high-level nuclear waste, and interstate banking. In addition to their four meetings a year, the governors of the six New England states meet with the governors of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania in an enlarged group known as CONEG (Coalition of Northeast Governors). The New Englanders also meet with the premiers of Quebec and the Atlantic Provinces—New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland—thus extending their interests and concerns to the north, south, and west of New England itself. Energy and fish have been the principal topics at meetings with the Canadian premiers. Groundwater was the subject of the last CONEG meeting in August 1985, at which time the Northeast governors urged the federal government not to cut back on waste-water treatment projects and also urged it to set national standards for drinking water. At one of their meetings in Springfield last fall, the New England governors learned, to their immense satisfaction, that the Reagan administration had finally admitted the governors were right

about acid rain, that, indeed, it is formed by sulphates and that those sulphates should, as far as possible, be eliminated.

However, the Governors' Conference, while showing a growing effectiveness, still remains a policy-proposing rather than a law-making body. The conference's limitations are obvious. Little can be achieved unless all six governors agree; even then, the governors cannot pass any laws or allocate any funds. As in their own states, they can only propose. It is up to the individual legislatures to dispose. The governors can and do have an impact on setting policy, but the process, almost literally, is a handshake operation.

Nor would the history of regionalism in New England be complete without reference to two additional organizations which, though now defunct, did play a role in its advancement and which could, I suppose, like the phoenix, return reborn. The first was the New England Regional Commission, spawned by President Johnson's Great Society, one of eight federally sponsored agencies commissioned to revitalize areas suffering from a lack of economic development. Of the eight agencies, first established in 1967, only one—the Appalachia Commission—struggles on, underfunded. At the same time, the feds also established the New England River Basins Commission under the Water Resources Planning Act of 1965, its mission to plan for and conserve water resources.

The New England Regional Commission was jinxed from the start, deadened by an excess of political appointments. By 1972 it had become the subject of a newspaper probe by the *Boston Globe*, which, among other things, described it as a "do-nothing bureaucracy squandering millions of dollars in bookshelf studies."⁵ Before the commission went out of business, however, a much more improved, more professional staff produced a New England Regional Plan and Economic Development Strategy that was substantive and that deserved implementation. The River Basins Commission, as opposed to the Regional Commission, worked smoothly and more professionally from the start and contributed a great deal to a New England-wide awareness of the need to conserve water resources. It was an agency that, had it continued, would have been more appreciated now than then. It was ahead of its time, which is ideal for planning purposes but not from a political point of view. The agency withered from lack of public and, in turn, congressional support.

President Carter, who, while governor of Georgia, had been at odds with the leadership of the Georgia Regional Commission, in presenting his final presidential budget declined to fund any of the nation's regional commissions. Appalachia was excepted. The cuts were sustained by President Reagan. When the two New England commissions died in 1981, the New England governors, wisely, approved the transfer of staffers from the successful River Basins Commission to the Governors' Conference. Thus ended a well-intentioned national effort at regionalism, as well as some \$8 million annually in federal funds which had been allocated to the two New England commissions.

So, what we're left with is the Governors' Conference and the Caucus of New England State Legislatures as the only two agencies with even a semblance of New England-wide influence. But neither has legislative authority. What is needed today is a breakthrough; an advance to a new plateau; a next step in regionalism. What should it be?

This is an opportune time to think regionalism. New England is flying high. The

70 National Planning Association predicts substantial population gains for both New Hampshire and Massachusetts between now and the year 2000—a gain of 560,000 for Massachusetts and 373,000 for New Hampshire. And, according to the U.S. Commerce Department, New England is today the richest region in the nation, with a per capita average income of \$14,421. Surely this is the time to plan a strategy that will maintain the region's gains, conserve resources, and lessen the pockets of poverty, whether rural, as in some of the sparsely populated northern counties, or urban, as in cities like Hartford, Providence, New Haven, Boston, Lewiston, Springfield, and Nashua. There is an enormous need for a New England-wide job training program that can meet the changing demands of the region, from shoes and cotton to high tech and biotechnology; a job training program that would develop a mobile work force prepared to move to wherever jobs in the region arose. There is a need for regional job fluidity, something that a new generation of schoolchildren should be taught as a norm so as to avoid depressed cities and communities.

Equally important is the need to expand agriculture in New England, utilizing greenhouses to extend the vegetable growing season while selectively reordering priorities in the breeding of farm animals. New England imports nearly 90 percent of its produce, 80 percent from California. There is a market here for fresher, tastier, less artificially preserved foodstuffs and the technology to grow it year round, but a strategy supported by all six states will be required to ensure effective marketing. With water problems in the West, which could cut production and raise prices, it would make sense for New England to become more self-sufficient in agricultural products. The handling and marketing of New England's fresh-fish catch could also stand improvement, and with new technology promising added shelf life, more fresh fish could be exported to the Midwest, thus adding to the value of this industry.

With a critical shortage of low- and low-middle-income housing, it would make sense to consider a public-private, independent regional authority to contract for and build such housing (at volume cost savings) under a standardized, realistic building code, especially as the federal government is distancing itself more and more from subsidized housing. And the New England states also face an urgent need to designate sites for the disposal of low-level radioactive waste, making use of whatever political trade-offs are required. New England, a major producer of low-level radioactive waste, may soon find there is nowhere to put it, unless at prohibitive cost.

New England could obviously benefit from a more formal approach to regionalism, but to reach that next plateau will require that (1) a regional assembly or forum be established, where issues can be debated publicly and constituencies formed to support those issues; and (2) a political process be put in place which is capable of producing, where appropriate, regional legislation.

Assemblies have been proposed before. In 1974, economist Rudolph Hardy, speaking at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, D.C., proposed a New England Assembly with the power to conduct regionwide planning. In 1981, following the termination of the two New England federal commissions, Hardy again proposed an assembly at a special meeting of government, public, and private-industry officials held at the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston. His proposal failed to attract support. An even earlier proposal for a New England-type Tennessee Valley (TVA) authority was made by a regional planning committee at Yale University but also got nowhere.

Perhaps, using these failed proposals as a measurement, the soundest and safest approach would be to expand on machinery already in place by forming a New Eng-

land Council of Governments. The council could be an enlargement of the present Caucus of New England State Legislatures, formed in 1978, which is made up of those persons who hold the six legislative leadership positions in each New England state. In addition to the six legislative leaders from each state, additional legislators could be appointed on a per capita state basis so as to form a broadly representative regional body of eighty to one hundred members.

This expanded Council of Governments would consider proposals, in the form of legislation, put forward by the proposed public assembly (a nonlegislative body), by the Governors' Conference, and from the council's own initiatives. The council would sit in session, in rotation, at each of the six State Houses for a fixed number of days annually and would act on any proposed legislation. Bills that were approved would be sent to the individual legislatures for consideration, where their chance of passage would be greatly enhanced because of prior approval by the regional body representing the legislative leadership of all six states.

This process would not encroach on states' rights, and it would provide a heretofore nonexistent system of enacting regional legislation with greater speed and regionwide understanding, both public and political. And, just as important, it would provide a centerpiece where regional issues could be discussed and acted on. Furthermore, there is no question that a meeting of the region's legislative leadership, on a circuit-riding basis, would attract media attention, something sadly lacking up to this time in regional affairs.

Endorsing the concept of more active participation by the New England legislatures as a means to more effective regionalism, something he has long endorsed, Dr. James Howell commented that the sooner we understand the need for this participation, the sooner we're going to be able to assure the long-term vitality of the region.⁶ Equally significant, however, would still be the need for a grassroots public assembly that could meet annually or biannually, also on a rotating basis, although at different times from the Council of Governments (legislatures). The Governors' Conference could maintain its present schedule of four meetings a year but perhaps hold one of its meetings in conjunction with the council in order to maximize and centralize discussion of proposed regional legislation.

In a conversation in August 1985 with Andrew Card, Jr., the president's White House assistant to the states, I asked him how the Reagan administration would react to a stronger regional presence. "We would encourage it," he said, although by "encourage" he was not suggesting a revival of the once federally funded regional commissions. Card, who, because of his liaison with the states, is in a better position than most to evaluate regionalism, says that the South has used the regional concept to greater advantage than any other part of the country, adding, however, that New England has one of the strongest cases for regionalism of all.⁷

Shouldn't that case be tried . . . now? It's time for the next step.

Notes

1. For more information on Mayor Jean Drapeau's hopes for three-hour fast rail between Montreal and New York, see Harold Faber's article in the *New York Times* on 4 December 1983, page 64.
2. *The Prospectus for the Commission on Higher Education and the Economy of New England* (Wenham, Mass.: New England Board of Higher Education, 1980), 18.

3. "Governor O'Neill Signs Bill Retaining Connecticut's Membership in the Compact," *Connection* 4, no. 2 (Summer 1982): 1.
4. Dr. James M. Howell's comment on the importance of the New England regional academic health centers was made during an interview with the author in January 1986.
5. "Spotlight on the New England Regional Commission," report by the Spotlight Team of the *Boston Sunday Globe*, 8 October 1972, 1.
6. Author's interview with Dr. Howell, January 1986.
7. Andrew Card, Jr., conveyed his views on regionalism across the country in a conversation with the author on 30 August 1985 in Washington, D.C.