

# New England Journal of Public Policy

---

Volume 3 | Issue 2

Article 2

---

6-21-1987

## Editor's Note

Padraig O'Malley

University of Massachusetts Boston, padraig.omalley@umb.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp>



Part of the [Public Policy Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

O'Malley, Padraig (1987) "Editor's Note," *New England Journal of Public Policy*. Vol. 3: Iss. 2, Article 2.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol3/iss2/2>

This Editor's Notes is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in New England Journal of Public Policy by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@umb.edu](mailto:scholarworks@umb.edu).

# Editor's Note

*Padraig O'Malley*

---

In the public domain, ideas undergird the specific policy decisions that elected officials and administrators make in order to achieve the shared goals their communities and constituencies articulate. Ideas are the pistons that drive the engines of change. The study of change, moreover, is a study of our ambivalence toward it. On the one hand, we embrace it with some assumption of its inevitable desirability, equating it with progress, with our aspirations for social improvement, with our propensity for wanting society to be better off, though what “better off” means often remains unclear and inchoate. Public figures routinely offer us a vision of the future that consists of little more than earnestly delivered promises to “get this country moving again.” They appeal to our imbedded sense of the frontier, of the uncharted as the guidebook to the promised land. We, in turn, mistake their calls to action for accomplishment. On the other hand, we resist change, associating it with sectional and special-interest lobbies, who both promote and resist it; with social, economic, and political disruptions that outweigh the perceived benefits; and with public intervention for ideological imperative rather than for the social good.

The connection between the process of change and the philosophy of policy-making in the United States is a theme in Robert B. Reich's *The Power of Public Ideas* (1987). Reich argues that “thoughtless adherence to outmoded formulations of problems, choices, and responsibilities can threaten a society's survival,” and consequently that “policymaking should be more than and different from the discovery of what people want”; that “it should entail the creation of contexts in which people can critically evaluate and revise what they believe.”

This issue of the *New England Journal of Public Policy* examines policy questions relating to change and resistance to change and the policy consequences of the failure to create the contexts Reich describes. Three articles (Robert Wood, Robert D. Gaudet, and David B. Walker) reach broadly similar conclusions regarding the inadequacy of what Reich calls the prevailing view of public policy, namely, that of the public sector as problem solver, intervening when it can to satisfy preexisting preferences more efficiently than the market can.

Robert Wood examines the voluntary attempt among public and private colleges and universities in Massachusetts to forge a partnership between 1973 and 1976. The Massachusetts Public-Private Forum flourished when it advanced *distributive* policies, such as joint scholarships and continued low tuitions for the public sector, in which both parties expected to gain in the distribution of additional resources; and it foundered when it tried to advance *redistributive* policies, such as a master plan for higher education, which assigned discrete missions and provided for a reallocation of resources. Interest groups,

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

Wood contends, find it to their advantage to cooperate when they can see themselves as more similar than dissimilar and the game as clearly non-zero-sum. The Forum collapsed because of its failure in an era of diminishing resources to convince both education sectors that in the long run the sum of their interests was greater than the sum of their differences. Ultimately, this led to the mediation of competition between public- and private-sector educational institutions through the larger political system—namely, a powerful lay-education Board of Regents appointed by the governor. This public-sector intervention put considerations of a more efficient and even equitable distribution of resources before questions of academic autonomy and independence. In short, the traditional view (the public sector as problem solver) prevailed, to the detriment of the relationship between public and private education sectors, when they were unable to define their common interests in terms that would allow them to create a mutually beneficial context in which to address their differences.

Robert D. Gaudet's analysis of the effort in the 1960s to reform public education in Massachusetts makes clear how difficult it is to develop properly an adequate context in which to critically examine and define policy directions. The Willis-Harrington Commission, which undertook a major examination of public education in the state, made more than one hundred programmatic recommendations. Yet the major difference in Massachusetts public education after the commission had finished its work was a reorganization of the board structure that governed the public schools. The commission did not succeed in making the new governing boards powerful enough to effect its programmatic goals, and education policy as reflected in the classrooms of the Commonwealth remained virtually unchanged. Although poor political leadership, the failure of the legislature to earmark state aid, and a shifting of the social agenda (owing in part to the increasing preoccupation with the question of racial imbalance) played their part in stymieing reform, the most debilitating impediments to reform were legislative prerogative—the legislature had been a major force in Massachusetts public education for many years prior to 1965—and the tenacity of local control of public education, which pitted weak, centralized state power against autonomous local control.

Relations at the national level between the center and the periphery come under scrutiny in David B. Walker's article. Ronald Reagan's federalism, unlike Reaganomics, has achieved far less than was anticipated in 1981, he argues. The intergovernmental system has been pulled in one direction by the "strong centralizing currents in the judicial/regulatory and political/representational arenas" and in a less centripetal direction by "developments in the intergovernmental functional, fiscal, and managerial spheres." As a result, Walker concludes, for the remainder of this century U.S. federalism "will probably be a little less nation-centered than it is now," but "the centralizing propensities of dominant interests in both the national parties are not likely to be overturned in the years immediately ahead." Federalism, however, will not become more cooperative, because there do not appear to be any contexts that will encourage "an authoritative state-local role in national policy-making and in operational matters" and "a preferential jurisdictional standing in cases involving [state-local] jurisdictions which are heard by the Supreme Court."

Dan H. Fenn examines the question of context from a different perspective. His concern is with the public manager—specifically, given the fractionated nature of power, the manager as policymaker. His public manager "must assemble and reassemble [power] and maintain it around each issue as it comes up." Power, he argues, "is a highly volatile, complex set of shifting interrelationships, personal and institutional, with which the man-

ager must deal, and it is different for each policy he is trying to effectuate.” A government official needs “well-developed sensing mechanisms and a special talent for negotiation and accommodation.” The “wheel of independent power centers with their ever shifting alliances” provides the public manager with his “authorizing environment.” Thus, “the process of management and the accomplishment of objectives in the public sector” depend upon the manager’s “ability to fashion programs and policies that attract enough support and neutralize enough opposition so that something reasonable comes out at the end.” The process is one of “compromise, accommodation, and amalgamation.” The creation of context depends upon the understanding and exercise of power.

“Vermont Revisited,” William Jay Smith’s sweet-bitter memoir of Pownal, Vermont, captures the political and social minutiae of a small, rural New England town in transition which continued to preoccupy itself in almost conspiratorial drama with its own parochial agendas, denying, even if not oblivious of, the changes at its doorstep. Yet Smith’s observations of the machinations that were grist for the mill of the small-town intrigues are tinged with a sadness, with an awareness of an old order dying, of old values under siege, of a new order intruding itself—less private, more depriving if perhaps more equitable, and antithetical to Vermont’s old culture and sense of self.

Finally, Shaun O’Connell reviews a number of books whose focus is the “loss and tenuous preservation” of cultural values. He detects signs of a cultural crisis in which “literature and American life are increasingly detached” and disturbing indications of a loss of “national consensus,” of trust, and perhaps of polity itself. Two hundred years after the signing of the Constitution, he writes, in this year of celebration, we learned in minute detail of the Iran-Contra deceits and duplicities, of government by secret White House junta having replaced the rule of law. Most dismaying of all, we did not appear to be unduly upset by these sordid revelations. This, of course, creates the need for yet another context. 🐾