

New England Journal of Public Policy

Volume 4 | Issue 2

Article 2

6-21-1988

Editor's Note

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Recommended Citation

O'Malley, Padraig (1988) "Editor's Note," *New England Journal of Public Policy*. Vol. 4: Iss. 2, Article 2.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol4/iss2/2>

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Editor's Note

Padraig O'Malley

For months on end we were subjected to the rituals of irrelevance: to posturing as patriotism, incoherence as eloquence, innuendo as nuance, character assassination as candor, sound-bites as substance, carefully memorized one-liners as expressions of spontaneity, self-righteousness as self-deprecation. Misstatement, outright fabrication, deliberate falsehood, and conscious distortion were spewed out by spin-masters, merchants of manipulation, propagandists, pollsters, shysters of the slick and technicians of the fast fix, all in the name of the democratic process. Nor were the two presidential candidates, Michael Dukakis and George Bush, themselves immune to the malaise, proving themselves extraordinarily adept time and again at not addressing any of the excruciatingly difficult choices a new administration will have to make.

But the realities the new president will face cannot be indefinitely obscured. The prosperity we enjoy, the unparalleled splurge in consumption during the 1980s, has been fueled by borrowing against the future. Although this observation is not especially new—and repetition has robbed it of urgency—what we have yet to adequately grasp, that is grasp to the point where the knowledge impels action, is the enormous cost of our excesses. The inescapable reality that that cost must now be met limits severely the choices open to us and has unsettling implications for the kind of society we may bequeath our children. We called the tune, danced with abandon to its seductive rhythms; now we must pay the piper.

The extent of our difficulties eludes us because we want it to; denial is the preferred panacea for the unpalatable. In 1980, the United States was the world's leading creditor nation; today it is the world's largest debtor nation. Eight years ago the United States had a position of preeminence in the world economy, which ensured that it was in control of its own economic policies; today it is in the position of supplicant, dependent on the goodwill of the countries that lend it money to finance the continuing extravaganza.

By 1990, 37 cents of every federal tax dollar will go to servicing the interest on the federal debt, and at least 3 percent of the country's national income will go to servicing the external debt. In 1980, the federal debt would have required 26 cents out of every dollar of income to pay it off — approximately the same as a hundred years ago; today, the federal debt amounts to 42 cents of every dollar of income produced. The government consistently absorbs almost three-quarters of private and business savings to meet its debt

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obligations; what is left is woefully insufficient to finance new business investment. As a result the rate of growth of the country's productive capacity is just over 1 percent a year, and the amount of capital at the disposal of the U.S. worker is no higher now than it was in 1980. Whatever growth occurs in the next four years will hardly be sufficient to cover the mounting interest on the federal debt and the balance of payments deficit, leaving little or no room for increasing standards of living. Our options are almost elegantly simple: either federal spending must be cut or taxes must be increased — matters on which no consensus has emerged — and the country's economic and fiscal houses put in order, if we are not permanently to mortgage the future for the present and sell our children's economic birthright.

What makes this picture bleaker still and the probable consequences of the painful alternatives we face more disturbing is the related fact that the false prosperity itself has skewed the economy in all kinds of undesirable ways. It has increased inequality, squeezed the middle classes, and raised the specter of a society increasingly polarized into two groups: the haves and the have-nots. In *The Great U-Turn: Corporate Restructuring and the Polarizing of America*, economists Barry Bluestone and Ben Harrison have documented this development with unimpeachable detail. Their research indicates that 57 percent of all jobs created between 1979 and 1987 paid poverty-level incomes or less; 34 percent paid middle incomes and 9 percent higher incomes. In comparison, in 1979 low-income jobs accounted for just 31 percent of all jobs, middle-income jobs for 65 percent, and higher-income jobs for only 4 percent. The trend is unmistakable: the broad jobs base of the middle classes is being eroded.

The New England Journal of Public Policy frequently addresses these questions of increasing inequality in the face of growing prosperity, entrenched poverty in the face of economic growth. Rising tides, it is quite clear, do not lift all boats; many capsize and some go under. In this issue, we continue our focus on these questions.

Sally Brewster Moulton examines socioeconomic trends in Roxbury, Massachusetts, between 1960 and 1985. Her findings indicate that despite growth in income, better labor force participation, higher educational achievements, and the presence of a black middle class, Roxbury residents as a whole have tended to fall further behind citizens of both the city of Boston and the larger Boston SMSA. Given Boston's recent unprecedented growth and the spectacular performance of the Massachusetts economy in recent years, her conclusion that "the income gap in particular has widened substantially, and the incidence of poverty remains at an extremely high level" should be a matter of concern for policy-makers. Nor can Roxbury's relatively poor performance be attributed to a "culture of poverty." Roxbury census tracts with the highest labor force participation and the lowest unemployment rates often had poverty rates that were sometimes exceptionally high compared to those of Boston and the Boston SMSA. Moulton's data strongly suggest that it is the prevalence of the working poor — a segment of the population "which, despite working on a regular and more or less full-time basis and therefore expounding the work ethic, nevertheless remains stuck in poverty" — that accounts for the continuing high levels of deprivation in Roxbury. The problem, she argues, is structural. In Boston "key social institutions [education, for example] have evolved in ways that, whether intentionally or not, limit the participation, and thus the progress, of racial and economic minorities."

William Crown also places a great deal of emphasis on structure — in this case the structure of labor markets — in his analysis of the changing economic status of the elderly population in Boston. He finds that, regardless of family status, elderly blacks have had systematically higher poverty rates than elderly whites, and elderly females higher pov-

erty rates than elderly males. He attributes these patterns to the structural characteristics of the labor market: women and blacks tend to be paid less than white males, to have interrupted work histories, and to work in industries and occupations with poor pension coverage. Poor older persons tend to be much more dependent on income from Social Security and public assistance than other elderly because they have largely been bypassed by one of the major reasons for income growth among the older population — the growth in pension income. Moreover, since labor force participation rates among the aged poor are already high, programs to increase employment opportunities offer little promise.

The role of institutional relationships in the development and implementation of public policy is a theme in both Richard Hogarty's article on the search for a Massachusetts chancellor of higher education and James Glinski's on the role of the Catholic church during the school desegregation crisis in Boston. Hogarty examines in great detail the search for a chancellor conducted by the Massachusetts Board of Regents in 1986, a search process, he concludes, that was flawed from its inception, an almost textbook case of "what not to do." By allowing outsiders to participate in their search, the Regents, he argues, "unwittingly gave up a certain degree of autonomy at the outset." Ostensibly, their actions were well intentioned, but in trying to make the process more democratic they succeeded only in making the Board of Regents "susceptible to political manipulation that it could not withstand in its bureaucratic infancy." Hogarty's case study forcefully makes the case for having public education boards find new ways to engage in dialogue with state government officials, if only to facilitate the development of procedures to properly manage "the dichotomy of tensions between legitimate political objectives and legitimate academic objectives."

James Glinski, like Hogarty, also emphasizes the role of the institution, the particular configuration of arrangements that mold it, its history and structure, and its relationship to its larger environment in the evolution of public policy. Thus, the Catholic church's failure to play a more significant role during the school desegregation crisis in Boston is placed in the context of its failure over the decades to develop a coherent urban policy. Criticisms of the church, which suggest that it allowed its schools to become a haven for students attempting to escape busing, are, in Glinski's analysis, an oversimplification of a complex situation.

Shaun O'Connell reviews a selection of readings for would-be presidents. None of our recent presidents — going back to Dwight Eisenhower — has been a reader of "imaginative literature." While this is not, perhaps, entirely unexpected and may be indicative of the pressures on their time rather than an intrinsic aversion to literature, it should nevertheless at least lead us to ask whether their visions of who we are and our possibilities are limited by their failure to "confront some of the implications raised by serious works of the imagination, works that force us to face mysteries in the world and in ourselves." And finally, James C. Thomson, Jr., in his vivid memoir "Refugee in New England," shows how our sense of place is central to the way in which we see ourselves and to our sense of belonging.

