

Re-reading *CommonWealth*

BY ROBERT KEOUGH

ORIGINALLY, I PLANNED to treat the 10th anniversary of the magazine as an excuse to re-read—and, I must confess, when it comes to some older issues and articles, read for the first time—the collected works of *CommonWealth*. But as deadline approached, it became evident that wasn't going to happen. The 44 issues of *CW* published to date measure nearly a foot and a half on the bookshelf, and with each issue containing up to 50,000 words (this one has 56,700, but don't let that intimidate you), a straight read-through was out of the question. But as editor for all but 16 of those issues, and a contributor since the third, I think I can comment on what Massachusetts has looked like over the past 10 years through the *CW* lens, even without a word-by-word refresher.

I'm the first to admit that anyone using *CommonWealth* as sole source might get a distorted view of what took place here over our first full decade. Many of the events and embarrassments that dominated headlines in those years get mentioned only in passing, if at all. That's because *CW* was not conceived as a quarterly synopsis of current events, nor as a running commentary on them. While not indifferent to the news of the day, *CommonWealth* aims to explore in a broader, but also more consistent, way the challenges of living up to the designation Massachusetts goes by in place of "state"—that is, "commonwealth."

In the very first Civic Sense essay, in the Spring '96 debut issue, founding editor Dave Denison wrote at length about the notion of "commonwealth" that has its roots in Puritan Massachusetts but provides civic inspiration even today. In the preamble to the state Constitution, written by John Adams, the "body politic" of the Bay State is defined as "a social compact, by which the whole people covenants with each citizen, and each citizen with the whole people, that all shall be governed by certain laws for the common good."

"In 200 years of economic and political history the very idea of 'the common good' has fallen upon many tensions," observed Denison. "And the notion that government is the natural guarantor of our common interests is today very much taken for granted and at the same time called cyni-

cally into question." But he also noted "a quiet revival of certain intellectual traditions that may lead us to a new consideration of the idea of commonwealth," including new thinking about "civil society" as a realm of citizen activity outside of formal government that could impact both politics and the economy. "If theorists tell us that more civic activity not only will revitalize democratic government but lead to better economic development," concluded Denison, "that is an idea worth pursuing"

For 10 years now, *CommonWealth* has pursued that idea,

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recognizing that the "common good" has both civic and material dimensions. Our coverage of politics in Massachusetts has left the food fights to others, and concentrated instead on what our state's elected and civic leaders, on their best days, are trying to accomplish, based on their conceptions of the common good. At the same time, *CommonWealth* has neither glossed over the sausage-making messiness of governing nor idealized some sort of good-government utopianism. *CW* has sounded the alarm on evidence of political dysfunction, the effect of which is to depress engagement in the public realm and encourage retreat into the private. Some examples: Dave Denison's departing "screed" against the deterioration of democracy into two-man rule ("The Last Harrumph," *CW*, Fall '99), my own plea for Massachusetts to be a bit less "exceptional" in its bungling of budgetary and other matters ("Aren't We Special?" Winter '02), and associate editor Michael Jonas's incisive reports on legislative sclerosis ("Beacon Ill," Fall '02) and hopes for new leadership ("Great Expectations," Winter '05).

At the same time, *CW* has expended as much energy outside the State House as inside, exploring the nature and variability of Massachusetts civic culture through such vehicles as associate editor Robert David Sullivan's mapping of state politics (Summer '02 and the current issue) and his political character study "Bay State Nation" (Summer '04), as well as our



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CIVIC SENSE

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EVEN AS WE examine the Massachusetts body politic, *CommonWealth* has been every bit as attentive to the body economic. After all, any reasonable definition of the “common good” for the individuals and families of the Commonwealth would have to include good jobs, good schools, and good places to live.

In our first 10 years we have plumbed no topic more deeply than education reform, which seems to be a never-ending saga. *CommonWealth's* treatment has included the magazine's one and only double issue (Spring/Summer '97) and its first full-length extra edition (Education Reform Extra '02), along with scores of other feature stories, Inquiries, State of the States rankings, analytical essays, and Argument & Counterpoints debates on everything from school finance to charter schools. *CW's* coverage of education has been an education in and of itself, as the often predicted (even by us) train wreck of widespread MCAS-denied diplomas never materialized but, by the same token, academic achievement remains maddeningly gap-ridden even today.

Also consistent have been *CW's* warnings of a certain tenuousness in the means of achieving and maintaining a middle-class existence. Such status is an American state of grace, the material basis not only for the Jeffersonian “pursuit of happiness” but for a civic life not distorted by desperation and want.

In 1996, 2001, and again this issue, *CommonWealth* traveled to Heritage Road in Billerica to check the heartbeat of the suburban middle class, and each time found it strong but irregular. Massachusetts has not been, and is not today, lacking in opportunity. But the basis of economic security has been steadily eroding, making the Holy Grail of middle-class comfort not only more elusive for those striving for it but more fragile for those who have attained it.

This is perhaps surprising, given that *CommonWealth* began publication at a time when Massachusetts was on a reassuring upswing from one of its deepest economic shocks, complete with job losses, bank failures, and home foreclosures. By 1996, the Bay State high-tech sector had gotten “its groove back,” in the words of a Winter '98 article, and was headed toward an economic run-up that would soon be the envy of the nation (even if no one dared to invoke the word “miracle” this time around). By the turn of the millennium, Massachusetts incomes were among the highest in the nation, and unemployment, at less than 3 percent, was among the lowest. Then the bubble burst, and we discovered, much to our dismay, that the New Economy acted very much like the Old Economy: What went up did come down.

More fundamentally, the economy Massachusetts depended on was becoming less stable even as it became more

dynamic. Jobs in our most forward-looking economic sectors—technology, financial services—looked less and less like the lifetime-employment, full-benefits Rocks of Gibraltar of an earlier era. Rather, these jobs were subject to stock-market volatility (“The New Economy’s Dubious Dividend,” Spring ’02), global competition (“Offshore Leave,” Summer

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’04), and what might be called the deinstitutionalization of employment, as competition, corporate restructuring, technology, and lifestyle changes made for the growth of independent contractors and other free-agent workers (“Lone Rangers,” Summer ’05). Even traditional employees came to carry more of the burden of health insurance and retirement savings. Only health care, with its firm institutional base in hospitals, looked anything like a traditional employer, and for all its promise as an economic engine of the future, the life-sciences industry threatened to be as much a drag on growth as a boon, given the costs health care inflation imposes on other industries (See “Prognosis: Anticipation and

Anxiety,” Health Care Extra 2004).

Meanwhile, cost of living became an ever-bigger challenge to middle-class life in Massachusetts. The price of housing, in particular, emerged as a threat to our economic future, as municipal self-interest impeded the development of modest-priced homes. The effects fell hardest on young families (“Anti-family Values,” Spring ’02), who began to vote with their feet (“Moving In or Moving On?” Winter ’04). The state responded with “smart growth” policies aimed at spurring housing development in an environmentally sensitive way, but they have been slow to take hold (“House Rules,” Growth & Development Extra ’06). It all adds up to a Massachusetts version of that 1970s economic anomaly, stagflation: sluggish job growth, declining population, yet precious goods priced out of reach.

Not a pretty picture, but it’s one that reinforces the reality that “commonwealth” is not just a state of being but an ideal to strive for. In both civics and economics, the social compact binding the residents of Massachusetts together for the common good is subject to constant renegotiation. As we head into our second decade, you can count on *CommonWealth* to subject the shifting terms of that compact to the closest scrutiny. That will be our contribution to the Commonwealth living up to its name. **CW**

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