

Generation slap

Jon Keller blames liberal Baby Boomers for all the woes of our *Bluest State*

BY ROBERT DAVID SULLIVAN

MUSHY-MIDDLE POLITICAL columnists often despair over the “blame game” that has supposedly poisoned American politics. And when a questionable use of taxpayer money appears on the front page of the *Boston Herald*, the parties caught red-handed often complain about nickel-and-dime stories getting so much attention when there are so many larger political issues to worry about. Both of these attitudes betray disrespect for the democratic process, which requires citizens to assign blame on occasion, and also gives them the right to decide which issues to be concerned about. Civil discourse has its place, but a raw sense of anger or disgust with the people in power is a perfectly legitimate attitude to take into the voting booth.

There is nothing wrong with writing a book full of anger and disgust either, and Jon Keller’s *The Bluest State* (published last fall by St. Martin’s Press) could have been a bracing look at what he calls the “insular and exclusionary” political culture of Massachusetts. Instead, Keller goes overboard, essentially accusing elitist “boomer liberals” of turning Massachusetts into the Worst Place on Earth. (Not that overeducated, exclusionary elitists don’t have a lot to answer for. I refer you to John Silber’s recently published *Architecture of the Absurd*, a witty and concise takedown of modern building design.)

“The Democrats from Ted Kennedy on down who’ve had nearly total control of the state for three decades talk a big game about their vision of a better deal for the masses,” Keller writes. “But their abysmal track record tells a different tale.” The Massachusetts that tourists don’t see, he writes later, “is a place where the poor lack hope and live in Appalachia-like squalor, where even middle-class workers with salaries well above the national median struggle to afford inferior housing, hold jobs that barely subsidize survival, and wait in vain for meaningful help from the state government.”

Even Mitt Romney isn’t that harsh on the Bay State.

But I’m not sure what the point of Keller’s vivid description is. If you replace his knock of “state

government” with “federal government” in that sentence, Keller would sound like any liberal Democrat during the Bush administration. Elsewhere in the book, Keller ridicules the “generous



Massachusetts welfare system,” so I don’t think his plea for “meaningful help” from government refers to more spending on social programs. Perhaps the state could help middle-class workers by paying for them to move elsewhere? But Keller doesn’t mention

any states, or countries, that have handled things better over the past few decades. You won’t find a sentence like “Why can’t we be more like Mississippi?” in this book.

MASSACHUSETTS DOES HAVE plenty of things to get angry about, even if Keller is being simplistic by blaming all of them on “boomers” (will everything will be fine once the Baby Boom generation dies off?) and Democrats (haven’t Republican governors and presidents had anything to do with the current state of affairs?). Some of his finger-pointing at individuals is more fun to read. There’s the school superintendent of Lawrence getting a customized SUV courtesy of the taxpayers, and there’s US Sen. John Kerry’s embarrassingly low level of charitable contributions, at least as claimed on his tax forms. Keller’s most damning chapter may be on “not in my backyard” attitudes, and in particular the efforts of some Cambridge residents to keep a private kindergarten catering to black students from opening in their neighborhood. But he again limits his criticism to liberal elites, failing to acknowledge that NIMBYism is rampant all over Massachusetts, including more conservative and working-class towns. It’s fun to mock the residents of Brattle Street, but we can’t put all of the state’s new schools, houses, and prisons there.

In other places, Keller doesn't let contradiction get in the way of a good rant. Like many pundits, he criticizes politicians for being insincere and calculating but also for being stupidly candid. Thus, Kerry as presidential candidate is mocked both for being a phony (an "awkwardly staged hunting trip") and for not being *enough* of a phony (for continuing to indulge in the "alien" sport of wind-

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surfing "even if it needlessly invited predictable, election-jeopardizing consequences").

More problematic is Keller's treatment of statistics. He makes good points in charging that Michael Dukakis papered over state budget problems while he was running for president, and that the cost overruns of the Big Dig are worthy of outrage. (The subhead on his Big Dig chapter is "The Fatal Consequences of the Boomer Appetite for Pork." I guess that makes Tip O'Neill a Baby Boomer. Maybe even James Michael Curley.) But Keller's credibility, and this can be said of many journalists, is hampered by his own carelessness with numbers.

For instance, it's hard to take any data at face value in a book that includes this numerically illiterate sentence: "We are only the nation's thirteenth largest state, but rank fifth in median housing costs, ninth in per-capita state and local tax burden, ninth-worst in economic burden on small business." For one thing, leaving out our high per-capita income exaggerates the heaviness of our tax burden at least somewhat. Worse, implying that our rank in any kind of *per-capita* measurement should be no higher than our population rank suggests that Keller is just larding his book with numbers, much like a laugh track on a TV sitcom.

Also troubling is Keller's habit of repeating statistics without telling us where they came from. Sometimes he divulges authorship (disclosure: he cites one study from the publisher of this magazine, misidentified as "MINC" rather than "MassINC"), but he's just as likely to cite "a 2006 study by a Boston think tank" and leave it at that. In one case, where he charges that business costs in Massachusetts are much higher than in other states, it takes a bit of Googling to confirm that he got his figures from the conservative-leaning Pioneer Institute. I have no reason to believe the data is wrong, but why make it difficult for readers to find the methodology behind the numbers if

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THE BOOK CASE

they desire?

Then there is this: “In a 2006 survey of Massachusetts expatriates, half fingered exorbitant housing costs as their main reason for moving out, 30 percent singled out high taxes, and 26 percent cited liberal politics as a significant negative.” That was a bit harder to track down, but Keller was apparently referring to a survey commissioned by the *Boston Globe* in which only 20 percent said that the cost of housing was the “most important reason” for moving out of state and only 4 percent singled out high taxes. (Keller’s higher numbers come from the section of the survey when respondents could name as many reasons as they wanted.) There was no question about “liberal politics,” and Keller seems to have got his 26 percent figure by combining the 12 percent who said liberalism was a “major factor” (not necessarily the deciding factor) in causing them to leave with the 13 percent who said that unspecified “political leadership” was a major factor. Keller does not mention that “a better job” was most often chosen as the main reason for moving out.

ANOTHER CREDIBILITY PROBLEM is that Keller’s estimation of local political figures seems proportionate to his ability to get good quotes from them. The heroes of *The Bluest State* include Rev. Eugene Rivers (who slams the state’s “paleoliberal intelligentsia”) and Boston Mayor Tom Menino (who warns of politicians “caught up in their own importance”). Oddly, Keller chooses Melrose Mayor Rob Dolan, whose salary comes from his neighbors’ taxes, as his case study of a middle-class homeowner pushed to the brink by the high costs of living in Massachusetts. At one point, Dolan sounds like Ron Paul, complaining that “people in this state” ask for too much from government. But a few pages later, he laments that he’s had to close two elementary schools in Melrose, and each time it was like “ripping the soul out of a neighborhood.” That takes-a-village rhetoric sounds more like Robert Reich (“Richard” in the book’s index), whom Keller describes as “the flavor-of-the-summer for liberals” in 2002.

It would have been helpful if Keller had talked to a political leader with some ideas on how to square the popular demands for lower taxes and better services, but either he couldn’t find one or he felt that such a person would distract from the thesis of his book. That is, liberal boomers have ruined everything and “the very same ego-driven neglect of true economic fairness and social justice [John Edwards] decries on the right is thriving like a flesh-eating virus right here in the bluest state of all.”

Well, it does seem like a waste of time to look for ways to make our current form of government more efficient and responsive when the Commonwealth’s very flesh is at risk. *Viva la revolucion!* **CW**