

OPEN UP, BOSTON

In time of great promise, a whiff of earlier tensions

TOM MENINO, a quintessential neighborhood guy, is nobody's idea of a privileged 1-percenter. But in his 20 years as mayor, he deliberately avoided casting local politics as a zero-sum battle between powerful downtown interests and Boston's working class.

After Menino opted not to run again this year, it didn't take long for that style of politics to reassert itself. Union-affiliated groups supporting candidate Martin Walsh sent out mailers alleging that opponent John Connolly "does not understand working-class people" and depicting the school at which he once taught at-risk children as an "elite New York" private institution. Never mind that last year Walsh, a state representative who also headed the city's building trades, had more than twice the income of Connolly, a lawyer turned city councilor. Class-warfare arguments like these play on the insecurities of various voting blocs. They're also a stand-in for historic divisions that have held Boston back, sometimes grievously so — Yankee vs. Irish, business vs. labor, Ivy League vs. non-elite, "outsider" vs. native Bostonian.

In an age of growing inequality, the question of whether a political candidate's policies favor the wealthy at the expense of others is an urgent one. But the unions' mailer made no such argument. Instead, the mailer played some old, insidious tricks: marking turf, appealing to group loyalty, and questioning other Bostonians' authenticity.

These tactics are not only an obstacle to healing, but tend to confirm a larger, unflattering narrative about Boston as a hive of parochial grievances, where historic slights that would have long passed from memory in other places continue to shadow current-day progress. It's an insider narrative that confuses and alienates those who have no stake in it, even as it ratchets up tension among those who cling to it.

But Walsh, whose expansive personality overcame longstanding ethnic divides during the mayoral campaign, has a chance to promote a broader prosperity without playing on old resentments. To do so, he must reject, as Menino did, the negative form of identity politics that pervaded Boston for so much of the 20th century.

In the waning years of the 19th century, a Protestant upper crust didn't just run the city; it saw itself as a natural aristocracy. As Irish Catholic laborers poured into Boston, a disdainful Yankee Legislature passed laws to deny them influence. When James Michael Curley came to dominate the city's political life from 1914 to 1950, he got revenge — channeling the anger of the city's working class, outmaneuvering fellow Irish-American politicians who took a more conciliatory stance, repaying the Yankees' hostility with relish.

As Boston seethed over past grievances, other big industrial centers just moved forward. During the Curley era, economists Edward L. Glaeser and Andrei Shleifer have observed, Boston grew more slowly than any other major American city. Decades of stagnation set in, during which a gritty skepticism came to define the city's image.

Since then, yesterday's immigrant groups have become today's power elite. Boston has surged back amid a boom in medicine, higher education, finance, and technology. But this growth has clustered in the dense northern sliver of the city; the neighborhoods along the Charles River and Boston Harbor are now bulging with successful newcomers from throughout the region and around the world. That same energy hasn't spread to middle-class residential areas to the south, much less to those neighborhoods where keeping children safe and adequately fed are the overriding concerns.

What Boston needs is a model for reducing inequality that doesn't come draped in Curley-era bunting. Taxpayers are regularly prodded by police and fire unions that purport to stick up for Boston's working class, even as their members earn six-figure incomes. This kind of posturing misdirects city resources — and gets in the way of addressing the educational and health disparities that keep today's poor Bostonians from thriving.

An alternative approach would, among other things, create jobs and ease housing costs by promoting significantly more construction across the city; remove barriers to opening new businesses in economically isolated areas; and enlist the region's technology sector to fix transportation and education problems outside the city's healthy downtown core. Walsh, with his ties to building trades and credibility in the city's neighborhoods, has the power to usher Boston in this direction.

"We Are One Boston," insisted a slogan after the Marathon bombings in April, an implicit acknowledgment of the city's history of turning on itself. If the electoral map from last month's mayoral election was any guide, Boston is starting to heal at least one of its deepest divisions: Walsh drew fairly equivalent support from white, black, and Hispanic residents.

Still, one more task awaits: hauling class politics out to the curb. In the movies and in political lore, there are always two Bostons, and the tension between them is inexorable. But especially at the end of a tumultuous year in the city, it's clear that Boston rises or falls as one.

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