THE MEL KING CAMPAIGN
& COALITION POLITICS
IN THE EIGHTIES

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INTRODUCTION

Mel King is a black radical who took 35 percent of the vote in a second place finish in the Boston mayoral election of November 1983. He was the first Third World candidate in the city’s history to make it into the final election. That fact, contrasted with Boston’s recent racial turmoil, attracted national and international attention to the election. Mel’s progressive credentials are uncompromised: he has a 30-year history at the forefront of every significant local struggle: anti-racism, feminism, anti-imperialism, gay liberation. He is not just a decent social democrat. During the campaign he continued to raise troublesome international and social issues which no “practical” politician would touch: the right to abortion (not just “choice”); welfare rights (not just jobs for poor women); sexism (not merely “protection” for women). He visited Cuba and compared Castro’s domestic policies favorably to Reagan’s. And he suggested that a Catholic cardinal might have encouraged anti-Semitism.

With such a record it should not be surprising that almost all leftists in Boston supported Mel King. It may however be surprising that he ever became a serious candidate in a city as conservative and racist as Boston. In this special issue we try to capture the energy, spirit, and hopes of the Mel King campaign. We also try to examine some of its contradictions and problems and their implications for Boston, the Left and electoral politics.

One of the greatest misconceptions that many outside of Boston have about this campaign is that it split the Left. Even Manning Marable, who came to Boston to speak on behalf of Mel, later reported that about one-third of Boston radicals supported Mel’s opponent, Ray Flynn. In fact, all organized feminists, including liberal feminist groups, supported King (in
contrast to Chicago where many women's organizations supported Jane Byrne rather than Harold Washington) because of his unequivocal stands on key feminist issues. Virtually all politicized lesbians and gay men supported King except for a small liberal gentry stratum of gays who supported Larry DiCaro (an anti-union, pro-business "liberal") in the preliminary. The only leftists who supported Flynn, to our knowledge, were whites, largely white men at that, oriented to a social-democratic perspective, and connected either with unions or organizations committed to a "populist" strategy. Even within this grouping, women active in local tenant organizing failed to rally strongly behind Flynn when the Boston Tenants' Organization endorsed him. Whatever the actual numbers, the more important questions (see Margaret Cerullo and Marla Erlien on feminism and the King campaign) is what definition of "left" or "progressive" would allow support for Flynn in the name of social change. The only logic that makes sense of this position is one that expects social change to be led and defined by white men.

As we began work on this issue, it became clear that we were ourselves pulled in conflicting directions as we tried to evaluate the meaning of the campaign. All of us in the collective, like most of our political comrades in Boston, had been involved in the election in some way. Some had worked extensively either in neighborhood organizing or at the central office; others had canvassed, worked the telephone banks, or promoted special events; the RA editorial board collectively helped to raise money. Though all white, we are a varied group. What drew each of us to such an unusual level of commitment and unanimity was the chance to be involved in a broad-based, multi-racial coalition which seemed open to us as socialists, as feminists, or as lesbians. "For once I did not have to deny any part of my identity in order to work in a political campaign — let alone an election," was how one person described it at a public forum that Radical America organized two months after the election. The campaign seemed to be a social movement with a receptivity to radical ideas that allowed us to overcome long-standing skepticism about the usefulness of electoral politics.

For most of us, the campaign was our first participation in the electoral arena. Our involvement in this type of work, even in this obviously "deviant" variation, also exposed us to the limits of electoral strategy. It brought us up against some of the concrete obstacles to unity or even to coalition building. Even as it allowed many white leftists to work in a multi-racial campaign, it highlighted the tensions between many white socialists and feminists and the progressive majorities in black and other Third World communities.

The articles in this issue attempt to identify and examine these and related issues. Together they articulate a few themes which emerged from our experience and together they raise a number of common questions. First, they suggest the importance of a black candidacy in opening up the issue of racism in society at large and within the Left. Contrary to the arguments of the social democrats that we shouldn't waste our energies on a "symbolic" candidate like Mel who could not win, no white candidate with Mel's politics could have come near polling a third of the vote. As James Green and John Demeter point out, the King candidacy grew out of years of anti-racist struggles in the city. But it also exposed the complexity of addressing racism. Mel's history as a critical actor in all the city's racial struggles over the past two decades "injected" race into the election, as the press described it, but it remained unclear to the King campaign, how to discuss racism. If Mel tried to insist that the candidates discuss their stands on racism, he was accused of polarizing the city. And the mainstream media, along with the local social democratic Flynn supporters, somehow made the argument seem credible that the best way to "unify" the racially torn city was to elect an Irish politician from South Boston with an anti-busing history. The King campaign did embody an important message about race. Mel said, "You know where I stand," and he was right; he walked through South Boston and shook hands in South Boston bars, symbolically saying that he could represent all the people. Nevertheless, in terms of the mainstream press, he remained the black candidate. Flynn was not the white but the "unity" candidate, and the King campaign did not succeed in forcing a full-scale public discussion of
racism in Boston. Even some of the Left media repeated the idea that the avoidance of such debates was evidence of "growth and harmony" rather than a missed opportunity.

Internally, as Candice Cason argues, the campaign also may have missed some opportunities in dealing with racism as well. There were a variety of concerns in the black community about the influence of white socialists, feminists, and gays within the campaign. In the interests of unity or due to the pressure of "getting on with business," conflicts, reflecting racial and cultural differences, about both the organization and content of political work were managed, rather than engaged. Such tensions should have been acknowledged and discussed, but were not.

Both the external and internal difficulties of addressing racism pose central problems. How can the goals of confronting racism, stopping racists, and giving more power to people of color be addressed when the raising of such issues, especially by a person of color, is viewed as provocative or divisive? Yet, we were also impressed by Mel King's own insistence on the need for a "positive campaign," as he called it, and the recognition that simply denouncing racism does not necessarily lead to change.

Other aspects of the complexity of building a multiracial coalition come from understanding the importance in Boston of Latinos, Asians, and other Third World groups, and the contradictions within and between those groups. Two articles in this issue, by Mike Liu and by Mauricio Gaston and Melania Bruno, address such problems. In both the Latino and Asian communities, the Mel King campaign sharpened contradictions already existing between different kinds of conservative and patriarchal political machines and younger, progressive rebels. King supporters among both groups saw that national and international issues may play important roles even in local elections, as James Jennings also points out in his analysis of national black electoral activity.

Another problem, even a mystery, of the King campaign had to do with the women's vote and the role of women's issues. Cerullo and Erlien examine the paradox that while the King-Flynn difference was nowhere greater than in their stand on feminism and women's rights, this difference was virtually obliterated from public view, and this despite the numerous feminists working daily on the campaign. Does this reflect an old problem of self-effacing priorities among women? Is there a tension between blacks and white feminists that inhibits black feminist activity? Or is there perhaps an inherent radicalism to feminist ideas that makes them particularly difficult to express in an arena dominated by electoral tactics and campaign "platform" statements?

Finally there were many problems in the campaign that seemed to us produced by its very success in the electoral arena. In American left-wing electoral politics, the candidates are usually marginal, "not serious," either in their treatment by the media or in public consideration. Candidates perceived as "serious" are not usually radicals, or are in the closet. However, sometime in the summer of 1983, Mel King became non-marginal without losing his identity as a radical. His victory in the preliminary, though, had a mixed effect on the campaign. As Ellen Herman suggests, the euphoria and the satisfaction of feeling powerful was offset by a centralizing tendency that weakened the campaign as social movement and, she proposes, even as an effective electoral machine. The question remains whether it is possible for any electoral effort to achieve success while maintaining a democratic, decentralized, and diversified structure and strategy.

Ironically, success in the preliminary election may have weakened the overall impact of the campaign. Success definitely increased the pressure against confronting internal differences and disagreements such as those discussed above. Here if anywhere our skepticism about electoral politics surfaces. While the King campaign does show that it is possible to retain values and principles it also showed us the enormous pressure to homogenize and dilute positions, all on the admirable premise of remaining open and accessible to the whole city.

* * * *

We are also pleased to include here Abdul Alkalimat and Don Gill's article on the Harold Washington campaign in Chicago because we
think that the King campaign cannot be understood in isolation from the national black political movement of which it is part. It was in fact the visit of Harold Washington to Roxbury in August that many see as the turning point in generating enthusiasm and active support for Mel King’s campaign within the black community. The difference in Mel’s vote among blacks since his 1979 campaign (a jump from 56 percent to 95 percent) must be partly related to this larger momentum. Although this issue is focused on the King campaign — and, in Chicago, on a parallel local effort — we are aware that it leads to interest in and questions about the Jesse Jackson campaign, which both rides on and fuels the wider momentum. For us, consideration of the national context underlines the need to examine, concretely, the role of electoral politics in our current political work.

While we became involved in the Mel King campaign, none of us has abandoned our reservations about electoral politics. The lessons learned from the civil rights, anti-war, women’s, and gay movements still live. They taught us that it is powerful and disruptive movements outside the electoral arena that force the system to bend. We remain cynical of the gains to be made by seeking influence within the bureaucratic terms of electoral parties and politics and aware of the dangers of loss of a radical vision. And yet, the reality is that Reagan is in power, the Left is isolated, the Right strong and vicious. Still, we believe we must continue to ask questions and not assume answers about how electoral work fits into attempts to defeat Reaganism, and to reverse its policies. We remain resistant to the headlong rush into electoral politics, even to the idea that “above all we must defeat Ronald Reagan.”

Mel King’s campaign is significant, as an electoral effort which stretched, as far as any we know, the possibilities of making electoral politics serve the dynamics of social movements. And yet, the articles in this issue mostly all point to the gap between the dream of the Rainbow Coalition and the political realities of work in the campaign. We must not forego assessing the costs and losses of electoral strategies, even if we participate in them. For local Boston activists, we must sharpen the questions that this campaign has raised.

Mel King, Harold Washington, and Wilson Goode are not the same, as James Jennings shows. The national dimensions of Jesse
Jackson’s campaign poses a host of distinct political questions. Not only are Jackson’s own political commitments unclear, but troubling contradictions emerge when a progressive movement aspires to actually winning the presidency, a position which, in our view, by definition means superintending worldwide oppression and exploitation. Despite these concerns and reservations, we have been impressed with how elections in Boston, Chicago, and southern states indicate the power of black-led campaigns to sharpen progressive perspectives, force them onto the national political agenda, and mobilize those who have been heretofore excluded from political activity.

We hope this issue can add to the national discussion of these questions. We hope that readers will respond with letters and articles, and also, if you like what we are trying to do, with subscriptions and contributions, since this issue is much larger and more expensive than our normal issues.

Despite our criticism, the overwhelming impact of the Mel King campaign was to raise our spirits. Indeed, the criticisms offered here are the distillation of a rich, complex learning experience. The Mel King campaign telescoped into a few months the kinds of learning that can only happen in times of intense activity when many new things happen every day, when we leave our normal communities and meet new people, when we encounter the human energies that normally lie crushed by daily survival stresses, and when we confront differences and take unusual risks.

We dedicate this issue to Mel King for being central in evoking all this, the more so because he would criticize us for doing so and would insist that the dedication belongs to the people who were his campaign.

* * * *

Finally, a brief note to readers and subscribers. Two articles that appeared in RA Vol. 17, No. 4 (July–August 1983) — Boaz Evron’s “Holocaust: The Uses of Disaster” and Catherine MacKinnon’s “The Male Ideology of Privacy: A Feminist Perspective on Abortion” — received a lot of response. We had hoped to include the letters and comments, along with the authors’ reactions, in this issue but were prevented from doing so by space considerations. We will print the material in our next issue and apologize for the delay.

Footnotes
2. The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) ran a candidate, Eloise Linger, in the preliminary election. Linger received a little over 200 votes.

CORRECTIONS

The cover of Vol. 17, No. 4 featured a photo of a painting by artist Freida Kahlo. Inadvertently, the credit for the painting was left out of the issue. We apologize for the omission.

In that same issue, in the article by Catherine MacKinnon, The Male Ideology of Privacy: A Feminist Perspective on Abortion, a line was missing in the right hand column on p. 27. The last sentence of the first paragraph should read: “In feminist terms, applied to abortion law, the logic of Roe consummated in Harris translates the ideology of the private sphere into individual women’s legal right to privacy as a means of subordinating women’s collective needs to the imperatives of male supremacy.” The italicized section was left out.
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THE MAKING OF MEL KING’S RAINBOW COALITION:
Political Changes in Boston, 1963-1983

James Green

On October 11, 1983 something electrifying happened in Boston. An inter-racial crowd jammed the Parker House and flowed out into the streets to celebrate a remarkable event in Boston’s political history. Mel King, a militant black activist, a man of peace with feminist and socialist sympathies, had run a principled campaign for mayor, and stunned the city by winning a place in the run-off election. He finished in a dead heat with City Councilor Ray Flynn, formerly a State Representative from South Boston. Characteristically, King led a demonstration from the Parker House down Tremont Street to City Hall Plaza where he gave an impromptu speech on what the place would be like when the people took over.

The press loved comparing the two finalists, “the craggy faced Irish battler from South Boston” and the “brawny, bald, bearded activist” from the South End. “The two men were the most leftward in the race, both running on a promise to shift money and urban planning energies away from glamorous downtown and harbor front development toward rebuilding Boston’s neglected working-class neighborhoods.” The two candidates’ “populist appeals were so evenly matched” that Time magazine could not distinguish them.

Indeed, each candidate did still live in the “rough Boston neighborhood where he was born and raised.” Both men had fathers who worked on the Boston docks and both at-
tended public schools. Left unsaid was the fact that Mel King went to one of the city’s few integrated schools, “the little United Nations” in the South End, while Ray Flynn starred in three sports at all-white South Boston High School. The two rough neighborhoods the candidates came from responded very differently to Boston’s historic busing crisis. White mobs stoned school buses full of black children in South Boston, parents in the South End formed escort groups for the white kids being bused into their schools. King and Flynn were both raised in poor, working-class neighborhoods, but more than the murky Fort Point Channel and the Amtrak yards separated the wide-open, multi-racial South End from the all-white, intensely parochial neighborhood Ray Flynn had represented in the State House.

Flynn and King had both declared their mayoral candidacies assuming that they would face Boston’s incumbent, four-term mayor, Kevin White. As this article shows, White’s administration was in crisis for many reasons, including the pressure of a federal corruption probe. When Mayor White decided not to run for a fifth term, the field opened up to include not only King and Flynn but also seven other candidates. Five were men of Irish or Italian background. There was one woman contender, the Socialist Workers Party candidate, who had trouble distinguishing herself from Mel King, and there was a provocative candidate from the crazy, right-wing U.S. Labor Party.

The front-runner in this field was David Finnegan, a slick talk-show host and former School Committee chairman, who raised tons of money from downtown and suburban business interests, and inherited many of Kevin White’s supporters. Flynn and King both aimed their attacks on Finnegan as the candidate of the rich who would carry on Kevin White’s pro-business housing and development programs at the expense of the neighborhoods. This identification proved to be Finnegan’s undoing, and he finished a poor third to King and Flynn, even though he outspent them by a vast margin. The preliminary election results were a repudiation of the pro-business “limousine liberalism” that had governed the city for decades. The election also recorded a major assertion of working-class discontent in both white and black communities. As a Globe columnist remarked: “The winners of the first post-White mayoralty preliminary are two candidates who weren’t supposed to be there. Passion counted for more than money, ideology for more than TV ads. Populism beat charisma. And the media got shut out.”

However, Finnegan’s defeat also had some troubling implications for the King campaign. If Mel had faced Finnegan in the final, he might have been able to win more white working-class votes from people hurt by the kind of economic and social policies that favored the downtown over the neighborhoods. But instead King faced Ray Flynn, who had carefully crafted his campaign, and indeed his recent political career, to appeal exactly to those white working-class voters hurt most by the pro-business policies of the White administration, and most offended by the arrogant, preppy style affected by both Mayor White and David Finnegan.

Mel King began his career in electoral politics in 1961 as a candidate for School Committee and a dedicated enemy of racial segregation in schools and housing. Ray Flynn began his career as a South Boston politician in the heyday of Louise Day Hicks, the arch-segregationist, and built his career in the State House and City Council as a “lunchbucket liberal” and a leading spokesman for anti-busing, anti-abortion forces. King attempted to make racism an issue in the mayoral campaign, and spoke out on the issue in a constructive way when he talked to audiences in all-white areas. Flynn insisted that racism was not an issue, but during the primary he passed out different leaflets in white and black areas. King identified himself as a feminist and spoke out against homophobia, while Flynn presented himself as a changed politician, a progressive who now opposed all sorts of discrimination. In recent years Flynn renounced his opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment and supported laws to prevent discrimination in housing based on race and sexual preference. But when he was asked how he would deal with violent attacks against women and gay men, Flynn simply said he would hire more police. And though he now claimed to support equal rights for women, Flynn did not renounce the amendment he sponsored in the State House to cut off
Medicaid benefits for abortions to state employees and welfare recipients.

King and Flynn had different political histories, different principles and strategies, and as a result, they developed very distinctive grass-roots coalitions. Mel King’s Rainbow Coalition developed out of the militant struggle against segregation waged by the black community and its white allies, a struggle which came to include Asians and Latinos in the past decade. Because of King’s active and principled opposition to all forms of discrimination, feminists, gays, and lesbians joined the coalition, as did most Boston area socialists who were impressed with Mel’s leadership in a range of radical causes and by his ability to connect issues of discrimination, economic exploitation, imperialism, and militarism. All the leftists under the Rainbow also appreciated Mel King’s courage, his willingness to maintain his principles and to fight back against race-baiting, red-baiting, and homophobia.

King’s preliminary campaign had a decentralized, movement quality about it, somewhat reminiscent of the civil rights movement. And the candidate, who had declared his independence from the Democratic Party in 1977, enhanced this feeling by consistently referring to the “we” of the campaign and by looking beyond the elections to the long process of popular empowerment. Participation in the Rainbow Coalition eased many leftists’ feelings of isolation and marginality. This foray into electoral politics offered us an unusual opportunity to transcend the limits of one-issue campaigns. We could work in a multi-national, multi-cultural coalition that brought together a range of issues and offered a progressive program we could take to ordinary people. For me and for many other white leftists campaigning in largely white working-class areas like Hyde Park, the effort allowed us to continue anti-racist political work in a new and more positive way. Mel King provided the leadership and encouragement we needed to take our politics to people in these conservative areas without being negative, defensive, or moralistic. Mel asked us to treat everyone as a “potential ally.” This effort proved discouraging in many respects, as John Demeter explains in his report from an Italian neighborhood, but it also gave some of us a hopeful sense that if the Rainbow Coali-
tion could build a base in some white areas by tackling community issues, as well as larger issues, then people in those areas might open up to the kind of message Mel was sending.

In his campaign Ray Flynn maintained his anti-busing, anti-abortion stance and took no chances on alienating his core constituency among conservative whites. He refused to recognize Boston's racist past or to use the term racism. He insisted the issues were the same in South Boston and in Roxbury. He turned his back on a historic opportunity to join Mel King and to address white people on the harmful effects of racism. He even refused to use his own immense influence in South Boston to intervene in the City Council campaign in his home district between Jimmy Kelly, the ultraright hate-mongering candidate of the anti-busing movement, and a liberal social worker.

Ray Flynn propelled himself into the final by distinguishing himself from the other white liberal Democrats. He campaigned as a populist defending the little people in the neighborhoods against City Hall and downtown business interests. At one point he confronted David Finnegan on City Hall Plaza declaring angrily, "This building is not for sale, David." Flynn understated and at times obfuscated his reactionary voting record on issues like busing and abortion. Of course, he already had the support of his conservative white, anti-busing, anti-abortion constituency. But this group would not be sufficient to make him a winner. Indeed, several single-issue anti-busing candidates had been defeated in the seventies. Flynn needed a broader base, including white liberal voters, and sought to widen his appeal by emphasizing his progressive record on economic issues, especially housing. As an at-large City Councilor, Ray Flynn had assiduously cultivated union and community support throughout the city, visibly involving himself in supporting strikes, rent control campaigns, restrictions on condo conversion, while doing many political favors for individuals. While Flynn used his City Council seat to cultivate citywide support, Mel King represented one district in the State House and tried to speak out on a wide range of issues concerning discrimination, exploitation, and militarism at home and abroad. While Flynn played a highly publicized role in the rent control struggle, King led the fight for a bill to divest the state of funds invested in South Africa. While the Councilor from South Boston was doing favors for constituents, Mel King was doing that and more by taking leadership on larger issues that concerned people of color, visiting Cuba, and trying to bring together a Black Caucus of state legislators. King's record on economic issues was much more progressive than Flynn's. Indeed, it was King who developed two key proposals which Flynn later endorsed: the idea of linking neighborhood economic development to downtown growth and the Boston Jobs for Boston People program establishing quotas on public jobs for city residents, minorities, and women. But King lacked the visibility and credibility Flynn achieved in many neighborhoods around the city on very specific issues.
Mel King’s preliminary campaign clearly represented empowerment for people of color. When King challenged incumbent Mayor Kevin White in the preliminary election of 1979, he finished third with 15 percent of the overall vote and 65 percent of the black vote. But in 1983 Mel nearly doubled his percentage of the total vote, swept the black community with 90 percent, and carried the Asian and Latino precincts with big majorities. His campaign and the idea of the Rainbow Coalition had dramatically boosted voter registration in minority areas with 23,000 new voters registering in the three weeks after his preliminary victory.

King’s 1979 mayoral campaign had seemed too radical for many black leaders, especially the ministers, but in 1983 national events altered the context for local politics and gave enormous impetus to progressive candidates like King. Harold Washington’s historic victory in Chicago created new excitement and unity in Boston’s black community. When Mayor Washington came to Boston in mid-summer to endorse King, his campaign surged forward in its recruitment and fund-raising activities. Visits by Andrew Young and Jesse Jackson added even more enthusiasm to the campaign and solidified King’s black support. Soon the polls showed that Mel King had a chance to make the final run-off because most of the newly registered voters were people of color who planned to vote for him.

During the primary each candidate did make a populist appeal to the “poor, the near-poor and working class that felt left behind in Kevin White’s glitzy downtown.” And though both candidates did run similar campaigns on “ground-floor economic issues” like jobs and housing, there were some obvious differences. Though Flynn based his coalition on a traditional white anti-busing, anti-abortion constituency, he did attract significant liberal and social democratic support from progressive leaders like Frank Manning of the Older Americans and Domenic Bozzotto of the Hotel Workers and from groups like the Massachusetts Tenants Organization and Nine to Five. King of course had far more progressive support: from all of the women’s groups and organizations representing people of color, from gay and lesbian activists, and from unions with significant minority membership and leftist leadership. But these defections to Flynn hurt. Progressive leaders like Manning, Bozzoto, and Lew Finer of the Tenants Organization respected King but argued that Flynn had “done his homework” and used his position on the City Council to be very visible on the issues and very helpful in doing favors. Other progressives and social democrats used a different kind of pragmatic argument: that a black candidate was not viable or electable in racist Boston and that it made more sense to back the best white progressive. Flynn’s leftist supporters went beyond this, taking the incredible view of the liberal Boston Globe that their candidate showed a “greater willingness to reach out” than King, even though a miniscule number of people of color supported Flynn. They also criticized Mel King for being ideological and divisive by injecting the issue of race into the campaign and thereby stirring up racism. And they tried to defend Flynn’s terribly conservative record on race and women’s issues, by emphasizing his economic populism and his recent support for some anti-discrimination laws. So when Flynn’s supporters emphasized the “ground floor economic issues” and criticized King for raising the issue of racism and for allegedly acting like “the black candidate,” they implied that race would not be a decisive factor in the final election.

But in the final election Boston did vote along racial lines. Flynn beat King by a two-to-one margin, carrying 80 percent of the white vote and only a small fraction of the vote cast by people of color. King’s supporters naturally viewed this as a discouraging defeat. Blacks in the Rainbow Coalition had reason to be especially depressed. Once again white liberals had failed to support black people. Many did not vote and many others ignored Flynn’s record of opposing desegregation, and decided to “back a winner.” Though many white voters said they admired and respected Mel King personally, they refused to support him. Indeed, one discouraging poll showed that one-third of the white voters interviewed would not vote for a black candidate under any circumstances, no matter how appealing the candidate’s proposals happened to be.

Though naturally discouraged by the lack of
white support, the King campaign did point out that Mel received 20 percent of the white vote, more than Harold Washington received in Chicago or Andrew Young in Atlanta, even though King ran a more radical campaign in a more overtly racist city. Many observers, as well as key black activists, thought that certain controversial statements alienated Catholics and cost King white votes. Others noted the gains Mel made in white areas over his 1979 campaign, even though he lacked a base in those areas and lacked the kind of support Flynn had developed in the unions and in the neighborhoods during his term as a City Councilor. The people who took the King campaign into white neighborhoods had certainly hoped to do better, but they also thought they could win far more support the next time around if Mel King and the Rainbow Coalition could maintain visibility and activity in those areas.8

Though Mel King might have done better among white voters under different circumstances, he did not mourn his defeat on election night. After all, his campaign had empowered people of color in a very impressive way. The upsurge of voter registration among blacks, Asians, and Latinos was in itself an important achievement. The campaign had also forged a very vibrant coalition of people of color, women’s groups, and white progressives that reoriented electoral politics in Boston. Though he had lost the race, King declared that the Rainbow Coalition had not been defeated. He thanked the crowd for allowing him to lead such a movement through what historians will recognize as a turning point in the social, cultural and political history of Boston.”

Future struggles will be required to confirm this inspiring statement. But looking back over the past two decades of Boston politics, it is clear that the black struggle for equality has provided the leadership for an even broader movement for social tolerance and progressive change. The making of Mel King’s Rainbow Coalition did not begin in 1983, but during that year the movement for economic, social, and cultural equality showed that it was ready to contest for political power. There have been some big changes in Boston politics since 1961, when Mel King first ran for the School Committee in a campaign that, as he recalled, did not “excite any great interest.”

In order to understand the changes that produced Mel King’s Rainbow Coalition, as well as Ray Flynn’s populist coalition, we have to appreciate the popular reaction that developed to the way Boston was governed from the early 1950s through the four-term Kevin White administration, 1968-1984. By 1983 both coalitions were fueled by real passion, grass-roots political enthusiasm, and class resentment. But if we are to understand the differences between the King and Flynn coalitions we must see how the policies of the White regime affected people of color in particular and we must review the long struggle over school desegregation. School busing was not a major issue in the 1983 election, despite King’s effort to make Flynn accountable for his anti-busing, pro-segregation record. But the core of each candidate’s coalition took shape during the busing conflict that polarized the Hub in the mid-seventies, and in some subtle ways the 1983 campaign was fought along some of the same battle lines drawn during the desegregation conflict.

The “New Boston” Coalition

Kevin White’s four-term administration (1968-1984) was the longest and most successful of the liberal “pro-growth coalitions that rose to power in many cities during the late 1960s.” Actually, the groundwork for White’s regime was laid in the 1950s and early ’60s by a business/reform effort to create a New Boston out of a run-down, depressed city with machine-controlled government. During the last administration of Boston’s colorful boss James Michael Curley (who left office for the last time in 1949) a business/reform coalition formed in response to an urban crisis caused by industrial decline, suburbanization, an eroding tax base, rising government expenses, and the “cancerous growth of the slums.” All of these things made Boston an unattractive place for capitalist investors, as reflected in the remarkable absence of skyscrapers from Boston’s skyline. The Brahmin business elite reacted with undisguised hostility to the city’s arrogant, charismatic Mayor Curley. He showed little interest in downtown development, displayed blatant ethnic and class pre-
judice in awarding city jobs and setting tax rates, and brazenly escalated the cost of city government by expanding public employment. As the cost of city services rose and the tax base declined (due to industrial migration), Mayor Curley drastically boosted assessment rates on commercial and industrial property. Ephron Catlin, a senior official of the First National Bank in this period, recalls that in the minds of businessmen "there was a feeling that Boston was in the hands of the supercrooks. Nobody had ever seen an honest Irishman around here, in the Yankees' opinion. God, they hated Curley."\(^{111}\)

After a fifty-year career in which he became kind of a folk hero to most working-class Bostonians, James Michael Curley lost in a close election to John Hynes, a bland young politician who had the backing of the New Boston Committee, a business-based reform group. As mayor, Hynes forged one of the country's first "pro-growth coalitions." It included a younger generation of ethnic politicians, "a new breed of government bureaucrats, large corporations, central business district real estate developers, merchant interests and the construction trades." The coalition also had the estimable support of Richard Cardinal Cushing, head of a very powerful Catholic archdiocese and an archrival of Mayor Curley, who failed in his last two attempts to regain City Hall in the 1950s.\(^{12}\)

Using tax breaks, federal grants, and big-bank financing, the New Boston coalition pushed for highway construction, slum clearance, downtown development, and government efficiency. Hynes initiated the "clearance" of the New York Streets neighborhood where Mel King was born and raised, and then the infamous destruction of another multi-ethnic area, the West End, which displaced 2,600 families and warned inner-city residents what the New Boston had in store for them.\(^{13}\) In 1959 a traditional machine politician from South Boston, John Powers, tried to revive the old Curley coalition and regain City Hall from the ruling group. Powers caused the City's Brahmin bankers and bond holders to break into a cold sweat when he threatened that, if elected, he would declare bankruptcy to solve the city's fiscal crisis. Business leaders immediately formed a special coordinating group, soon dubbed "the Vault," and backed a pro-business candidate named John Collins who defeated Powers and began to reform city government, laying off 1,200 city workers and hiring New Haven's redevelopment czar Ed Logue to get on with "slum clearance."\(^{14}\)

The Civil Rights Movement

During the 1960s Boston's highly segregated school and housing systems became targets of organizing and protest efforts that would lead to significant changes in city politics. In 1961 the NAACP sued the Boston Housing Authority for practicing de facto segregation and the courts found the BHA guilty. The public schools suffered both from the neglect of the city's new business leaders and the retrograde and blatantly racist practices of the old machine politicians who maintained control of the
school Committee and School Department. In 1960 Citizens for Boston Public Schools (CBPS) formed to protest conditions and a year later it ran four candidates for School Committee. The two whites won and the two blacks lost. One of the losers was Mel King, a youth worker at United South End Settlements. In 1962 the Northern Student Movement, initiated to support civil rights struggles in the South, joined some black churches to set up tutorial programs. In 1963 the Citizens' group, the NAACP, and CORE all published reports critical of de facto segregation in Boston's schools and joined forces to pressure the School Committee. When the Committee refused to acknowledge de facto segregation, students boycotted the system. An unexpected 9,000 students (about one-quarter of the student body) participated in the Stay Out campaign of 1963 and many attended Freedom Schools modeled after those in the South. The civil rights movement in Boston kept the pressure up on all fronts. At the same time, Mel King led a STOP day and asked people to walk off their jobs to protest de facto segregation, police brutality, and other forms of discrimination. The NAACP and other established black leaders opposed the idea of a work stoppage and called their own demonstration, a memorial to slain civil rights leader Medgar Evers. But the two groups did come together in a "gesture of solidarity" marching through the South End while singing "Freedom, Freedom" and "We Shall Overcome" to a rally on Boston Common.

In response, the School Committee became more intransigent. The Chairperson, Louise Day Hicks of South Boston, had been elected to "keep politics out of the schools" and at first appeared open-minded, but in 1963 she emerged as a leader of the white resistance to desegregation. That fall she campaigned for re-election on the race issue as a defender of segregation and the "neighborhood school." Indeed, during the summer of 1963 Hicks identified herself as the budding symbol of northern intransigence toward civil rights demands," according to Peter Schrag. She also identified herself with Mayor Curley's populist legacy and claimed to represent the "little people" of South Boston and the city as a whole. She "resisted the whole establishment on behalf of small people who never expect to make it big," wrote Schrag. Hicks led all candidates in the 1963 election and Mel King failed to come close in his second bid for the School Committee.

Mel King in 1965 when he was with United South End Settlements and a candidate for the Boston School Committee.

During the mid-sixties Boston became a battleground of civil rights protest and white resistance around the issue of school segregation. The protest movement included parent boycotts, student strikes, dramatic School Committee hearings, picket lines, marches, and the creation of "freedom schools," including one at South End Settlement House where Mel King was "principal." This agitation (highlighted by Martin Luther King's appearance on Boston Common) led to the passage of the state Racial Imbalance Law in 1965, which demanded desegregation but prohibited busing as a solution. After a brief lull, boycotts continued, notably at the Gibson School described by Jonathan Kozol in Death at an Early Age. A new phase of the struggle began. Black demands for "community-controlled education" led both to voluntary plans for busing black children to suburbs and to the opening of private community schools in Roxbury. In 1965 Mel King and other Citizens' candidates again confronted Louise Day Hicks for using the "fear-laden issue of busing and race for her own political advantage," but without success. Hicks won an impressive victory over the field because one in three citizens voted only for her. But Mel King came in sixth in the race for five seats, and for the first time in the city's history, a greater percentage of black voters than whites went to the polls in an off-year primary election. A direct line ran from the electoral mobilization created by civil rights struggles between 1961 and 1965 and the new level of black political activism in 1983.
Kevin H. White's Regime and Independent Black Politics

In 1967 Louise Day Hicks decided to run for Mayor on her segregationist record and her new reputation as a populist champion of the "little people" in poor white neighborhoods. This was also the year that Mel King became director of the New Urban League and began a program to help black parents confront school problems. And it was a year of intense black protest. Mothers for Adequate Welfare occupied the Roxbury welfare office at Grove Hall. When protesters gathered outside, the police rioted and looting and burning broke out afterwards on the black commercial strip. The police riot and Hicks's racist mayoralty campaign called for continued mobilization in the black community.

Kevin H. White, a new type of Irish politician from all-white West Roxbury, waged a liberal campaign against Hicks. He presented himself simultaneously as a reformer, as a developer who would continue plans for the New Boston, and a Kennedy liberal who would restore racial peace. After an intense, bitter campaign, White beat Hicks by less than 5,000 votes. He won because he received over 15,000 black votes after a registration drive and a push to get out the vote led to an unprecedented 68 percent turnout among blacks. Along with Hicks's defeat, black and white supporters celebrated the election of Thomas Atkins, the first black elected to an at-large City Council seat.

Once elected, Kevin White began to build a patronage machine modeled after Richard Daley's organization in Chicago with an important arm in the black community. White modernized the New Boston coalition by gaining more white liberal and black support. Though Kevin White governed more effectively than many of the liberal pro-business mayors of the era, he was not unopposed. First, the continuing mobilization of blacks and white allies against school desegregation took place independent of City Hall and eventually led to the 1974 court-ordered busing plan which took the schools entirely out of the city government's hands. Second, there was less coherent but continuous unrest and protest over the pro-

business development policies of the White administration which led to luxurious downtown growth while neighborhood business and housing suffered.

In 1968, White's first year in office, all of these opposition currents swirled through city politics. A third community-controlled black private school opened and the Black Panthers began a free breakfast program and visits to white teachers' classrooms. Parents and students continued to boycott the schools at certain times. In one incident a student was suspended from English High for wearing a dashiki, and black students walked out in protest, joined by some whites. A Black Student Union was organized. And in 1968 the first black labor union in modern times was formed. The United Community Construction Workers (UCCW) aimed to fight against discrimination by contractors and unions. The assassination of Martin Luther King led to violent protest, and in its aftermath activists created a Black United Front (BUF) which included many important groups (though not the NAACP, which was apparently offended by the group's nationalist politics). When confronted by the Front's demand for community-controlled development funds, Mayor White listened but then tried to co-opt the BUF by forming his own group, the Boston Urban Foundation, with the same initials. At the same time housing struggles intensified. The South End, a battleground during this stage of urban renewal, produced a strong neighborhood advocacy group, CAUSE, and two tenant unions, one of them a Hispanic organization. In 1968 CAUSE members, including Mel King, occupied a Redevelopment Authority office in the South End to protest inadequate relocation plans. Then they picketed a parking lot in the South End where the Redevelopment Authority had bulldozed liveable buildings, displacing one hundred families. When CAUSE members blocked the parking lot, twenty-three were arrested, including Mel King. A Tent City was then erected on the site which has since become a symbol of popular resistance to the city's pro-business housing policies. 19

Black people supported Kevin White in his 1967 contest against Louise Day Hicks because they hoped he would change some of these
policies. They have been disappointed. The sixteenth anniversary of Tent City is this year and the site is still vacant. Apparently a new luxury shopping center will use the land for parking and there will be no new affordable housing. The support the black community generated for Kevin White in 1967 was not unqualified or unequivocal. Though White attempted to bring some black loyalists into his organization, he could not subdue the strong streak of independence that had been evident in Boston black politics for a long time.

As early as 1926 black political leaders split with the Republican Party and tried to seek leverage with their small but often crucial vote in close nonpartisan preliminary elections. In 1935 a united front formed, including Democrats, Republicans, Socialists, and Communists, to nominate black candidates for city office. Though lack of a strong political machine has suggested weakness, in fact, as James Jennings argues, the independence of the black vote meant that Democratic politicians, including Curley, often courted it assiduously. A small patronage organization attached to the Democratic Party did emerge during the 1950s when the black population increased significantly. And in 1958 the leaders of the organization helped one of their members win election to the State House. But this black “machine,” which taught Mel King his first lessons in electoral politics, had very limited patronage. It fit into the “service stage” of political development which, according to King, involved “taking the white power structure’s handouts rather than organizing the community to demand satisfaction of black needs.”

Of course Mayor White tried to prolong the “service stage” in black community development, but as events in the late sixties showed, a new “organizing stage” had already begun, quite independent of the Democratic Party. For instance, in 1971 two-term City Councilor Thomas Atkins decided to challenge Mayor White in the preliminary even though the contest also included Louise Day Hicks and even though the mayor aggressively wooed black voters. White again faced Hicks in the final. After pushing very hard for black and Latino registration, he won the election by a big margin. But this time White’s victory over Hicks did not depend on his black vote. And so the mayor began to build a stronger base in white working-class areas that had been solidly for Hicks, and where he was known as “Mayor Black” because of his promises to voters in Roxbury. White could now pay less attention to the Afro-American community because he thought he could always count on black votes if he faced a more conservative white candidate in the final. It also meant that City Hall would be less helpful with voter registration.

White incorrectly assumed, however, that he could take the black vote for granted. If anything black voters were becoming more independent. In 1971, along with the Atkins challenge to the mayor, a militant black woman named Patricia Bonner-Lyons ran for School Committee. Even though she attacked White and made no secret of her Communist Party affiliation, she gained a solid black vote and nearly won. In 1972 Mel King, by now a well-recognized militant and critic of City Hall, won election to the State House from a mixed district with a white plurality.

The Busing Crisis

In 1972 a group of black parents, supported by the NAACP, brought suit against the School Committee in federal district court to challenge the continuing and increasing school segregation. Judge Arthur W. Garrity issued his decision on June 21, 1974 and ordered the School Committee to implement his busing plan that September. Massive and violent white opposition surfaced, led by School Committee chairman John Kerrigan and City Councilor Louise Day Hicks. There were doubts about the court order in the black community, not only regard-
ing the safety of children, but also over the lack of community control involved in the plan. State Rep. Mel King had tried to develop an alternative plan that allowed blacks more control of schools in their neighborhoods and would eventually make a majority of teachers in those areas black, but the Boston Teachers Union killed the plan, refusing to give up control over any jobs. 24

When school busing began in September of 1974 and white crowds attacked black students and other people of color, the black community and its white allies rallied to defend students’ rights to a safe, desegregated education. As the violence continued through the fall of 1974 and it became apparent that the White administration and the Police Department would not take sufficient steps to protect black people, Mel King and others wondered if they “were doing the right thing” by supporting busing. Mel had his answer when he talked to a black student being bused to South Boston High School. “We have to go,” she declared with passion. “If they run us out of that school they can run us out of the City.” For this student, and for many other people of color, busing was not “just a matter of education; it was an intensely political experience” from which hundreds of young black people got a very practical education. They would come to play a big role in Mel King’s campaigns for mayor. 25

While black leaders and parents rallied at Freedom House in Roxbury to try to “keep calm in the black community and to prepare . . . children for the harsh realities that awaited them in formerly all-white schools,” something very different happened in white areas. 26 Political leaders like Hicks and local organizers mobilized through organizations like ROAR (Restore Our Alienated Rights) and stirred up white resistance in a threatening situation already filled with racial hatred. Ray Flynn, then a State Representative for South Boston, strongly supported ROAR, marched in its demonstrations, and emerged as “one of the leaders of the anti-busing movement.” During the 1983 campaign Flynn claimed to have been a moderating force within South Boston, but his public stance was anything but moderate, especially his bill to abolish compulsory school- ing and his votes against the Racial Imbalance Act. 27

Race had been the key issue in Boston politics ever since 1963 when Louise Day Hicks ran for School Committee as a defender of segregated education. During the 1974 busing crisis groups like ROAR pushed politicians like Ray Flynn to be more outspoken defenders of de facto segregation and more obstructive opponents of busing. Just the opposite happened in black politics. In 1974 a new State Senate seat was created in a primarily black district. An established leader, State Rep. Royal Bolling, Sr., faced Bill Owens, a younger, more militant State Representative. Owens had been directly involved in the movement against segregation as one of the parents who organized one of the first community schools in Roxbury. He campaigned as a supporter of mandatory busing and as an outspoken critic of racist politicians in Boston. Owens defeated Bolling in a divisive contest, making an issue of Bolling’s support for a voluntary busing plan to replace the court-ordered plan. During the fall of 1974 Senator-elect Owens provided leadership for a large militant march against racism and in favor of busing. Up to this time few socialists, except those in the Communist Party, had been involved directly in anti-racist work. 28 Now many younger left activists became deeply involved in supporting the black struggle for desegregation. This anti-racist work laid the
basis for their involvement in the 1983 campaign.

While white politicians moved to the right and some black politicians moved to the left, the White administration antagonized both camps with its inconsistent policies and obvious desire to save face during the crisis.

The Growing Crisis of the White Administration

While White tried, not too successfully, to avoid responsibility for the busing conflict, his housing and development policies continued to generate grass-roots opposition, and the mayor could not escape responsibility for those policies. Indeed, during White’s first three terms, Boston became a prime example of a city in which neighborhood residents mobilized against pro-business development policies. As neighborhood opposition to New Boston priorities continued, City Hall turned away from slum clearance policies and the blatant land grabbing of the Redevelopment Authority and focused more on fancy downtown projects like the suburban/tourist oriented Quincy Market. ²⁹ For example, in the South End, busing was not a problem, but poor and working-class residents and their professional allies organized against the luxury housing developers who were given a free hand and lucrative tax breaks by City Hall to “rehabilitate” the area’s beautiful brick bowfront houses, thus displacing the poor and elderly from the multi-national, low-rent district. By 1974, when some of the white gentry in the South End brought suit to stop the development of public, low-income housing, even the mayor bemoaned the growing inner-city class struggle over housing between the “haves” and “have nots.” What he did not say was that his own housing policies were to blame. ³⁰

White managed to keep a governing coalition together despite major community protests against his policies, an inner-city class struggle over housing, and the extreme racial conflict over busing. He proved far more adept than most of his contemporaries at responding to crises that threatened to rip apart his pro-business coalition. While other liberals gave way to “cop mayors” like Rizzo in Philadelphia or to black mayors like Young in Detroit, Kevin White stayed the course and continued to
build up a patronage machine second only to
the Daley organization in Chicago.31

In 1975 White won reelection to a third term
over Joseph Timilty, a more conservative white
politician who had alienated most blacks. But
support for White was soft as turnout fell in the
black wards and discontent with racial violence
and jobs turned to resentment. Moreover, the
State House Black Caucus was divided. Ac-
cording to Mel King, a Caucus member at the
time, conflicts emerged between those
“building personal power and those dedicated
to empowering the community,” especially in
efforts to “fight police harassment, a serious
problem in Boston.” “Some black elected offi-
cials thought that the demands being made by
the community would be too radical,” King
writes in his book Chain of Change. Some also
felt that meeting these demands would jeopar-
dize their standing with the black middle class.
“But how could any Black official be ‘too rad-
cal,’” King asked, “given the oppression con-
fronting the great majority of Black people in
Boston?”32 Mel King has been answering this
question with principled action for many years.
His consistency and courage continued to gain
him credibility among black leaders even
though he was still unable to bring them to-
together in an “independent political organiza-
tion.” As conditions worsened in the seventies
Mel King maintained his radicalism as a per-
sonal conviction; but it also reflected more than
ever the oppression of Boston’s hard-pressed
black community.

Progressive Black Politics

Though progressive black politicians like
King and Owens had success in the early seven-
ties, division still existed not only on the ques-
tion of militancy but on the question of loyalty
to the White organization. The Mayor not only
used patronage as a carrot; he used his office to
undermine independent politics in the black
community. He employed patronage to reward
friends and to punish enemies and to nurture
cooperative black political leadership. He also
created an impressive public relations operation
to preserve his image as a liberal and he manip-
ulated various electoral processes, including
voter registration, to his advantage. Though
White encouraged minority voter registration
to defeat Hicks in 1967 and used City Hall to do
so when he faced her again in 1971, his Election
Department became less helpful in the seven-
ties. In fact, the number of registered black
voters actually dropped in the three predomi-
nantly black wards from 28,637 at the start of
White’s administration to 20,069 in 1979. This
resulted in part from lack of support for
registration, from growing opposition to
White, and from continuing frustration with
the at-large system of city elections which made
it very difficult for minority candidates to gain
elected office.33

In 1977 a plan emerged to return to district
representation, which Yankee reformers had re-
placed with at-large elections in a futile attempt
to limit Irish political power. Mel King, who
helped initiate the plan, rallied black support.
Politicians from areas like South Boston who
had been successful in at-large elections vehe-
mently opposed the plan and Mayor White did
not support it. It lost by only a few thousand
votes.34

Black support for district representation was
not diminished by the fact that a black person
did win election to the School Committee at-
large for the first time since the early 1900s
when there was still district representation.
John O’Bryant, who gained this important vic-
tory in 1977, had been a guidance counselor
and teacher for fifteen years and had struggled
against the system from within. Though not a
radical, O’Bryant was a close ally and friend of
Mel King and had managed two of Mel’s unsuc-
sessful campaigns for the School Committee in
the sixties. O’Bryant was independent of the
White administration and he showed that a pro-
gressive black candidate could be successful in a
citywide race. He was also a skilled political or-
ganizer who knew the importance of mobilizing
the black community independently. In 1978
O’Bryant led a group that included Mel King in
forming the progressive Black Political Task
Force, which called for the empowerment of
people of color and made other demands in-
cluding full employment and “the redistribu-
tion of goods and services.”35 What James Jen-
nings, a member of the Task Force, calls the
“new face” of progressive black politics was
clearly viable in Boston by 1978.36
In 1979 Mel King decided to challenge Kevin White in the preliminary election. The effort represented a "process" and a move away from the politics of personality toward decentralization and participation. He renewed the struggle for district representation and began pulling together a coalition of the various new social movements against discrimination and repression, with the intention of building a "structure" that would endure after the election. During the summer a network of white leftists and Third World militants active in anti-racist work staged an impressive concert called "Amandla: A Festival of Unity" featuring Bob Marley. Mel King appeared with Marley before a crowd of 15,000 and connected the problems of racism in Boston with those in southern Africa whose liberation groups would benefit from the concert's proceeds. Many of those leftists who produced Amandla would also be involved in Mel's campaign.

Although Kevin White maintained the loyalty of some black voters and some leaders, notably the ministers, King won a majority of the black vote in 1979 and finished a surprising third in the preliminary with a total of 15 percent. Though he maintained his militancy and raised little money, King had demonstrated the promise of progressive black politics.18

After the election King's supporters formed the Boston People's Organization.19 The BPO might have provided a basis for more unity between black and white progressives if it had not been stymied by long debates over process and program which discouraged participation by ordinary working-class people. The BPO tried to be everything to everybody rather than to focus narrowly on local neighborhood issues or to become primarily an electoral organization to carry on with the kind of agenda Mel King campaigned on in 1979. The Organization failed to hold black participation after the election, partly due to the insistence of some organized white leftists on playing leadership roles. The BPO took part in the unsuccessful effort to defeat the tax-cutting referendum Proposition 2 1/2 in 1980 and played a key role in the effective 1982 campaign for charter reform and district representation. This victory injected real energy into political efforts by feminists, gays, lesbians, and people of color who could now concentrate their power in a few district elections instead of being all disenfranchised by the at-large system. This important democratic reform also laid the groundwork for Mel King's 1983 campaign and for the district campaigns of several left candidates including Charles Yancey, a black progressive, and David Sondras, a gay activist, tenant organizer, and member of Democratic Socialists of America; both were elected to the City Council. Several of the leading white BPO activists took important positions in Mel King's campaign, but the Organization itself did not survive. Indeed, the
Rainbow Coalition superseded it and hopes to succeed where its predecessor failed.

Progressive black politics gained momentum rapidly after 1978 for various reasons; a) the success of black candidates for School Committee (O'Bryant won re-election in 1979 and was elected Chair in 1981, when a black woman, Jean McGuire, joined him on the Committee); b) the impact of Mel King’s surprising third place showing in the 1979 mayoral elections, and c) the emergence of a new generation of young black political activists who came of age during what Mel called the “organizing stage” of community development and had taken part in the difficult struggles for desegregation.

Moreover, mass discontent began to surface with the destructive policies and broken promises of the White administration. Boston had become a more dangerous city than ever before for people of color. Even after the stopings of school buses subsided, other racist attacks continued. Black homes were attacked in white areas. Twelve black women were murdered in six months during 1979 provoking angry protest over official lack of concern. A black high school football player was shot down on a field in white Charlestown and permanently paralyzed. And the police shot and killed three black men without being brought to justice. All of these outrages led to anti-racist organizing and defense work; and at the same time they certainly convinced many people of color that the White administration would not protect them.

Mel King’s 1979 campaign also helped to raise long term economic and social grievances. Indeed, during White’s regime employment conditions for people of color actually worsened in the private sector. A recent EEOC study showed that blacks “lost ground” in scores of industries during the last several years. Minorities were under-represented in many clerical and sales jobs that required minimum training and few specialized skills, even though minority people in Boston are better educated than their counterparts in other cities. Mayor White could hardly defend the unimpressive level of minority hiring in city jobs that took place during his tenure, and of course he could take no credit for minority hiring that resulted from court suits against the police, fire, and school departments which had remained lily white during his first two terms. He also stood aside during the bitter struggle of the United Community Construction Workers to apply “the Philadelphia Plan” for minority affirmative action hiring in the construction industry, a fight which ended up in the courts and not in City Hall.41

Faced with a recession and unemployment in 1973, the UCCW had turned toward a new strategy of allying with other minority workers. In 1975 the once all-black union reached out to Hispanic and Asian workers. Blacks gave up some of their power in order to make the union more democratic and representative, an important point in the making of the Rainbow Coalition. They then secured federal money to set up the Third World Jobs Clearing House. And in 1977, under Mel King’s leadership, minority workers developed a Boston Jobs for Boston Residents program that also reached out to white workers who lived in the city. The Boston Jobs program demanded that a minimum of 50 percent of the total workforce, craft by craft, be composed of Boston residents on all publicly funded or subsidized development projects in the city. A minimum of 25 percent had to be minority workers and a minimum of 10 percent women. When negotiations over the policy broke down, King began to push Mayor White on the issue during the 1979 campaign, and the mayor responded by trying to co-opt King’s support: first with an executive order on minority hiring, and then by making the quotas in the King jobs campaign binding.42 (Once reelected, White let the matter ride until the Supreme Court declared the Boston jobs residency program constitutional in 1983.)

Though White’s public relations people tried to give him the credit for his policy, black workers knew that Mel King was responsible. King’s hope that the Boston Jobs Coalition, formed in 1978, would attract white workers who lived in the city remained unfulfilled however. The white construction unions, whose members lived largely outside the city, opposed the residency program tooth and nail. But the quotas the Jobs Coalitions advocated did affect hiring on the big Southwest Corridor project and the massive Copley Place enterprise, where newly elected Mayor Ray Flynn has promised
to make sure the King hiring quotas are enforced. Now that the residency policy is in law, the construction unions may try to evade it, but the fact remains that far more minority workers and women will now be employed in construction and in service jobs — and they can be unionized if they can be convinced that the unions are not their enemies.

Under the White administration business boomed and jobs were created, but more for suburbanites than citydwellers. The city added 50,000 new jobs after 1970 but by the end of that decade 65 percent of the new jobs belonged to commuters. A key test for the future will be whether more white workers will see their interests as tied to the development of progressive black politics and the Rainbow Coalition, rather than to the conservative policies of the white trade unions and old-fashioned pols. King, though he seems anti-union in some of his statements, has reached out to white workers in both of his citywide campaigns, asking them to side with the interest of the 80 percent who remain unorganized and unrecognized by unions instead of the 20 percent who are mobilized by union leaders interested only in preserving limited privileges.

The Housing Issue and Fair Share Populism

Housing became a terrible problem for poor and blue-collar working people during White’s tenure as mayor. Development projects like Copley Place created new jobs and tax revenues, but they drove up the cost of housing in nearby areas like the South End and accelerated the pace of gentrification. During the early seventies I lived in a South End lodging house, the kind of dwelling that once provided shelter for thousands of single and retired workers who paid only a few dollars a week for a furnished room. In 1965 nearly a thousand lodging houses still existed in the South End, but by 1974, after luxury condo and apartment developers sunk their fangs into the property, only 250 remained. Now there are just 37. As a result of White’s development policies many lodgers have been forced to live with their families or have ended up in the streets. White’s housing policies also removed 18,000 rental units from the market during the seventies. About half were demolished and the other half rehabilitated as high-cost housing.
While the cost of housing and other necessities soared, the incomes of working-class Bostonians failed to rise significantly. In 1980 the Hub was rated as having one of the lowest median family incomes of any major city ($16,062) and one of the highest cost of living figures. Under White’s administration the downtown prospered and became “the most integrated financial service center in the U.S. outside of New York” with $300 billion of capital in its bank vaults. Inner-city neighborhoods were gentrified, eight new luxury hotels were started or completed, and fashionable stores and boutiques popped up with dazzling frequency. The contrast between the haves and have-nots became glaring.\footnote{35}

The city did nothing to ease the housing shortage for the working class. In fact conditions worsened. A few militant groups won victories, like the Hispanic tenant union, Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción, which developed its own community-controlled housing in the South End. But existing public housing suffered from criminal neglect as thousands of units were removed from public use. The situation was so bad that the courts put the Boston Housing Authority into a receivership. According to court-appointed administrator Harry Spence, “There has been a sense at some level in City Hall over the last fifteen years that there are just too many poor people in this city and too much subsidized housing, and that if they just let public housing slide, [the poor] will go away. Besides being a peculiarly malicious policy, it won’t work — poor people can’t go away.”\footnote{36}

Mel King’s activism on the housing issue was well known, at least among black and Hispanic people and white people in the South End and the other neighborhoods he represented in the State House. His leadership became obvious in 1968 when he was arrested at the Tent City site. His activism brought him into direct conflict with the White administration. As Mel wrote of South End housing policies, “While racism and lack of government protection pushed people of color out of white working-class areas, government planning [continued to push] people of color out of the South End to make way for the ‘gentry.’”\footnote{37}

While King championed the cause of the most oppressed by the housing situation — that is, people of color — Ray Flynn, also a state rep during the seventies, took a more general approach to the housing crisis. He became a strong advocate of public housing, rent control, and strict rules on condominium conversion. These policies also brought him to conflict with the White government and allowed him to take advantage of the organizing led by citizen-action movements whose leaders adopted a populist approach that ignored racism as a central issue in housing struggles.

White working-class people, especially the elderly, had serious problems with the housing situation whether they were over-taxed homeowners, evicted lodging-house dwellers, tenants, or owners who worried about blockbusting. Initially the disaffection with White’s housing and development policies came from black or mixed areas like the South End.\footnote{48} And at first white working-class areas did not mobilize against urban renewal assuming they could not fight City Hall.

During the early seventies student radicals moved into white working-class areas like East Boston and Dorchester to start organizing projects, community newspapers, and, in Dorchester, a Tenant Action Committee. Some of these people had been involved in Harvard-Radcliffe SDS and the Indochina Peace Campaign. Others were sponsored by liberal churches. Two of these radicals, Michael Ansara and Ira Arlock, decided to organize white working-class youth alienated by the war and the economy. They started The People First (TPF) in Dorchester and focused on removing a corrupt, tyrannical judge who employed blatantly racist sentencing policies. TPF did attract some angry young white people, connected with the Vietnam Vets Against the War and got rid of the obnoxious judge (on corruption charges). But it soon fell apart as ex-student radicals dropped in and out of the project and conflicts erupted between the indigenous youth and the outside left leaders.\footnote{49} Then Ansara found liberal grant money to open the Boston Community School in 1973. It provided resources and courses for community activists and newspapers like the Dorchester Community News. The School also housed the CAP Energy program, an effort concerned with utili-
ties, and Nine to Five, founded by Karen Nussbaum, a member of the Harvard group, and dedicated to organizing women office workers.

At the same time a few other student radicals, some of them from the Northern Student Movement, had come to work with the Dorchester Tenant Action Committee. In 1973 DTAC changed from being a tenant organization to a broader group that included homeowners. The new Dorchester Community Action Council (DCAC) still fought for rent control but also took up issue like neighborhood deterioration that affected both tenants and homeowners. Though homeowners could not be expected to support rent control, they were the “key actors” in deciding what should be done about issues like blockbusting, redlining, and abandoned housing. DCAC worked in integrated neighborhoods and constantly encountered whites who believed that neighborhoods deteriorated because blacks moved in. So organizers tried to zero in on the institutionalized racism of bankers and real estate interests who busted up white neighborhoods and then victimized blacks who followed. Instead of taking what one DCAC organizer called the “liberal approach” of saying to whites that blacks were just the same as they were, they focused on the common enemy of both groups. Personal racism was handled privately, and occasional racist attacks were publicly condemned but the focus remained on the destructive, divisive policies of banks and real estate companies.

In 1976 DCAC merged with CAP Energy and a new group called Fair Share working in Chelsea, Waltham, and East Boston. The new organization, Mass. Fair Share, headed by Michael Ansara of the Community School, built up a large statewide membership by hiring students on a commission basis to canvass door to door. The organization received good publicity for its local campaigns on street repairs, playgrounds, schools, housing, taxes, and utilities. It also carried on the work of DCAC in racially troubled Dorchester, where it was difficult to find a neutral site to have an inter-racial meeting. In this tense setting Fair Share did organize a number of block clubs in a black and Hispanic area, and in the aftermath of busing it did begin to “forge alliances between blacks and working-class whites on issues that transcended race.”

Fair Share’s appeal to people of color was limited however by its organizers’ approach to racism. Like the early Dorchester Community News and DCAC, the organization refused to take a stand for desegregation through busing, or to make racism itself an issue. As late as 1980 some of the staff expressed distress when the Fair Share convention voted to endorse the Catholic Church’s anti-racist Covenant of Justice, Equity and Harmony. Charlotte Ryan, a community organizer who worked on the Dorchester Community News, observed that while many individual organizers in Fair Share were personally concerned with fighting racism, they did so in a private way. Unlike Louise Day Hicks and Ray Flynn, the anti-busing populist politicians, these organizers would “never use racism to build a popular base” and indeed sought to defuse it by emphasizing “winnable, non-divisive issues” that “transcended” race. But by taking a strictly economic approach to problems that would yield “quick victories,” “they ignored and sometimes denied the racial component of issues,” according to Ryan, who shared this view of organizing when she began her work in Dorchester. As a person of Irish working-class origins and a member of a trade union family, she took the populist view that you could “unite people around common economic grievances without addressing racism directly.” She opposed busing as a divisive plan. However, after working in the black and Latino sections of Dorchester, Charlotte Ryan came to feel that she had a “white person’s view of racism.” “It wasn’t something I lived with everyday as black people did. Like other white
people I didn’t see how the world was divided on race and I didn’t have the door slammed in my face all the time just because of my race. People of color couldn’t choose whether or not to make racism an issue, like the white organizers did. If you were black in Boston you couldn’t escape the issue.”

Ray Flynn’s Populist Coalition

Given their populist view of racism it was logical for Fair Share organizers to support Ray Flynn’s campaign for mayor in 1983. Though Flynn had not come to his populism via the anti-war movement and community organizing, he did adopt an economicist approach to the issues, especially housing, that basically resembled Fair Share’s approach.

Flynn’s campaign staff, which included several progressives on the populist left, knew that he would maintain his conservative, anti-busing constituency no matter what, so they wanted to emphasize his changed position on issues like the Equal Rights Amendment and anti-discrimination housing laws which he at one time opposed. Flynn had worked closely with the Massachusetts Tenants Organization (MTO) formed in 1981, and used his position on the City Council to become a leading supporter of rent control and banning condominium conversion. The MTO leadership endorsed Flynn over King because, according to one leader, he was more “visible” on the housing issue, though King’s voting record was every bit as good. Though Fair Share did not endorse anyone formally, its leaders and many members worked for Flynn, who benefited from the single-issue organizing efforts these groups made in white areas. Support from liberal leaders in MTO, Nine to Five, and the Elder Americans also helped Flynn’s effort to present himself as a progressive — in spite of his very conservative voting record on social issues, including prominent leadership of a sustained fight against publicly funded abortions.

Though Flynn did attract some white liberal support, his coalition consisted principally of white working-class people hurt by the policies of the New Boston which favored the downtown over their neighborhoods. This anger became more palpable when White began clos-

ing schools and fire and police stations in white areas in an effort to pressure the legislature to approve emergency fiscal aid for the city in the wake of the tax-cutting Proposition 2½. Ironically, the effects of the measure angered even the taxpayers who voted for it and then saw their services cut back, and their jobs threatened by public employee cutbacks. Under these circumstances, unionized public employees who had lived with or by the patronage system became surprisingly agitated with the city’s unfair policies of hiring, firing, and promotion. This was especially true in the police, fire, and teachers unions, which had become alienated from White and strongly supported Flynn. Of course much of that alienation was also directed against black public employees hired and retained as a result of affirmative action court cases. Flynn made no effort to correct the impression that he opposed affirmative action. Finally, though neither candidate wished to arouse the bitter feelings connected with busing, Flynn maintained his adamant opposition to the court order and naturally captured the conservative white voters. The importance of this highly political group is underlined by Flynn’s refusal to oppose the hatemonger Jimmy Kelly, head of the antibusing South Boston Information Center, in his race for the new South Boston-South End City Council seat, even though Kelly opposed a liberal associate of Flynn.

Though Flynn and his progressive supporters claimed to want minority support for a governing coalition that would “bring the city together,” a straight economic appeal lacked credibility to people of color. Flynn’s strained argument that the issues were the same in South Boston and Roxbury contrasted strongly with Mel King’s insistence on making an issue of the “incredibly high level of racism” in Boston. Flynn even objected to using the term racism and denied the city’s bigoted past. “The real problem is economic discrimination,” he said in an important TV debate. “There are poor whites and blacks who do not have access to the political power structure in this city” and whose neighborhoods shared none of the downtown’s economic wealth.” Flynn’s staff shared this populist-economist approach to the issues and believed that it would be divisive to
confront racism and make it an issue. Flynn’s campaign manager, a former student radical, Ray Dooley, told me that Mel King’s insistence on making racism an issue actually damaged the city’s prospects for racial peace and made King appear as the “black candidate.” Dooley seemed to think that racism was a leftist issue, not the central issue for people of color or the key problem in working-class life generally. The social democrats in Flynn’s campaign were very sensitive to criticisms from the left, but they were far more worried about being branded as leftists themselves and therefore embraced pragmatic reform politics.

The Flynn campaign’s appeal for economic unity and fear of divisive issues like racism harkened back to earlier populist and reform movements which emphasized good government and economic justice as the best antidotes to discrimination. These movements advocated economic democracy (now the slogan of the new populist and social democratic left), but not social equality which implied race-mixing and integration. It was much easier to attack Wall Street and assume that all oppressed people would be united by common economic grievances than it was to take up the difficult struggle for equal rights. Ray Flynn’s socialist and progressive advisors repeated some past mistakes by assuming that racism and other forms of discrimination could be avoided as political issues and that economic reforms alone could bring people together. Such false idealism has never had much appeal to groups like women and blacks whose oppression cannot be lifted just through economic reform.4

The original Southern populists attacked the worst effects of racism, like lynching, but they did not address racial bigotry in their own ranks. Instead, they counted on common economic grievances to unite black and white farmers; but because of racism and the legacy of slavery, the lot of white yeomen and tenants differed significantly from that of black sharecroppers. Indeed, blacks had to respond cautiously to the populist appeal for economic unity because for them “there was no purely ‘economic’ way out.” White populists did not confront racial differences and conflicts within their coalition and tried to “dissociate themselves from the ‘race problem.’”

Therefore racism could be used more easily to destroy the movement and it could reappear much more quickly within the ranks of defeated white populists, as the tragic career of Tom Watson suggests. As leader of the Georgia People’s Party, Watson made an heroic attempt to unite black and white farmers in the 1890s, but when the Party was defeated, he turned to racist demagoguery and became a leading spokesman for anti-Semitism, anti-Catholicism, and anti-radicalism. The classic problem for populism a century ago remains a problem today. Populists promise equal opportunity and “fair shares” through democratic reform and economic justice, but they usually fail to attack the structure of social inequality or to combat the discriminatory attitudes that can easily poison inter-racial coalitions.4

Ray Flynn adopted a populist “fair shares” approach to equality, rather than the “equal shares” approach advocated by Mel King. Flynn apparently believes that if the voters elect a “man of the people” who identifies with the neighborhoods as against downtown interests and that if he refrains from creating an “unfair” patronage system, then everyone has a good chance of getting their “fair share” of housing, services, and jobs in spite of the way the private housing and job markets work and in spite of the blatant favoritism that has always controlled the distribution of employment and services in Boston. The implication: there is no need for binding affirmative action and militant struggle on the part of women, people of color, gays, and lesbians. Indeed, during the campaign Flynn gave no hint that he understood the structural bases of racism and sexism or the cultural and psychological bases of prejudice that make discrimination a problem even with full employment and adequate housing. He seemed to feel that his personal stand against discrimination, combined with strong law enforcement, would satisfy oppressed groups. He did speak movingly about the “hidden injuries of class” including his own family’s experience of being on welfare.4 And like many Boston Irish, he has a strong sense of anti-Catholic oppression. But Flynn generalized too easily from his own experience without trying to understand the special circumstances of women, people of color, gays, and lesbians.
For example, when the two candidates appeared before women’s groups, Flynn was asked how he would respond to violent attacks against women and gay men. His answer was to hire more police! Mel retorted that the police were part of the problem. When asked to define sexism Flynn seemed at a loss for words. King responded to questions from a feminist perspective.

Despite all the rhetoric about bringing the city back together, Flynn ran a very conventional, cautious campaign, designed to maintain the conservative white support he had marshaled as a South Boston politician. There was a strong restorationist tone to his populism, an appeal to return to the days when Curley was mayor and “the little people” were well-represented, a desire to go back to the neighborhoods when there was no crime and no struggle over housing, to preserve the Church’s traditional teaching on the family and abortion, and even the neighborhood school as it existed before busing. He emphasized restoring services and jobs to the working-class people left out of Kevin White development plans and patronage networks. It is not clear though how Flynn will do this without creating his own patronage regime, just as Curley and White did, and using it to reward friends and punish enemies. If he succumbs to politics as usual, which is what many of his hard-core supporters want, he will never be able to create the broad-based governing coalition he promised to build after the election. 18

Mel King’s Rainbow Coalition

The Rainbow Coalition that formed around Mel King’s candidacy also included people hurt by the New Boston and it too responded to the struggle of the neighborhoods against downtown interests. Its constituents felt even more excluded from Kevin White’s patronage organization than did the members of Flynn’s coalition. The King movement, however, emerged directly from the struggle for school desegregation and Flynn’s came from the fight against it. This difference in origin accounts in part for other significant political differences. Take left support for example. Flynn won the support of the populist left concerned mainly with “non-divisive” economic issues, and King won the support of the women’s movement, the anti-racist movement, the gay and lesbian movements, and the anti-imperialist and peace movements, as well as independent socialists who saw clear connections between issues of poverty, racism, sexism, imperialism, and the arms race. To take this a bit further one rarely saw Fair Share as an organization, or significant elements of the populist left, at the various Boston rallies and demonstrations concerning issues like nuclear arms, divestment in South Africa, US intervention in Central America, or on behalf of safe streets for women, reproductive rights, gay pride, or Puerto Rican nationalism. And Ray Flynn’s presence would have been unimaginable. Mel King was almost always there, linking the issues on what he called the “chain of change” and taking what he humorously called “a whole left approach.” This gave the Rainbow Coalition much more than a feeling of outgroups getting together to put their chosen leader in City Hall. It felt like a movement, but this time it was a multi-issue, multi-group movement that really seemed integrated.

Ray Flynn appealed to a desire to restore the past status of the neighborhoods in the romanticized age of James Michael Curley. Mel King made a broader appeal to community based on a solidarity of struggle in Boston that transcended neighborhood lines. And King’s strong ties to the Latin and Asian communities allowed him to reach out to unify different communities of color and to include groups like lesbians, gays, and feminists, groups whose identities and agendas were not neighborhood-
based for the most part. For these groups there was little to restore or romanticize about the political past in Boston. So Mel King helped give the Rainbow Coalition a vision of a future based on a unification of the new social movements. This sense of cultural unity and an almost utopian vision of the future contrasted strongly with Flynn’s conventional campaign and attracted thousands of people alienated from electoral politics entirely.

King himself gave mixed messages. Clearly his whole political career personified black cultural pride and political independence, but Mel King has never been a separatist. Throughout the campaign he reached out to white citizens and appealed to their best instincts. He often reminded the leftists and militants in his campaign to treat people in white areas as potential allies, as “people the same as you and me.” He showed by his words and actions that he respected white people more than their own political leaders did. For example, he expressed outrage at the way demagogues constantly reminded the Boston Irish of their oppression, but instead of creating something positive out of their people’s anger, they used it to create a “hostile defensive mentality.” He actively sought white supporters, not by assuring them that people of color had exactly the same problems, or by ignoring the divisive issues of racism and bigotry. He used his Boston Jobs residency program to appeal for unity between white and minority workers in the city but he also attacked the white unions for refusing to support affirmative action. Unlike Ray Flynn, who ignored a historic opportunity to address his white supporters on the subject of racism, King insisted that people who practiced or condoned discrimination were also hurt by it. He appealed not only to people’s economic self-interest, but to their self-respect as human beings.

During the preliminary campaign, King visited the largely Irish section of Savin Hill in Dorchester where a black man had been killed by a subway train while trying to escape a gang of white youths. King asked to address a white citizens’ meeting on the causes and consequences of this incident. “Look,” he said, “the other candidates won’t come here and talk to you about the problem of race. And that’s because they don’t respect you enough to think you can deal with the issue. But here we have situation of a black man dead, and his family grieving. We have young white people in jail accused of murder and their families are in agony. White and black people are at odds in this city, but tell me, who won this one?”

How do you evaluate the effects of such a campaign? It was clearly the first time most white people in the city were addressed so clear-
ly and so eloquently on the issue of racism. Perhaps the ground was not prepared in the white areas so that King could appeal to voters there on a range of issues. Perhaps making racism the issue in his campaign cost him votes. I doubt it. In any case this was an important step in the anti-racist struggle in Boston, and clearly exposed the opportunism of Ray Flynn's populist notion that racism need not be confronted head on because it was largely a matter of economic competition. There will never be an easy, inviting opportunity to confront white people about racism. Mel King made the most of his opportunity even in areas where the ground work had not been laid.

Few movements in US history have actually involved white people learning from black people's struggles. The Rainbow Coalition in Boston actually began this way. It was based on a historic mobilization of black people that began in the early 1960's with the fight against de facto segregation and Mel King's first city wide campaigns for School Committee. In 1983 the mobilization included the Asian and Hispanic communities and various social movements composed of white people, largely but not entirely progressive in orientation. Perhaps the lesson they learned was largely lost on the vast white majority who elected Ray Flynn mayor. In any case, that majority should look at the city's black history again and think twice about the future. In the past decade the black population increased significantly, the other Third World population leapt up by 100 percent, and the white population declined. If present trends continue, by 1990 people of color in Boston will be the majority. As Mel King says, other movements have much to learn from the black struggle, which has "gone through all the stages of developing consciousness and competence and has come to the point where they are prepared to enter coalitions."

His book, Chain of Change concludes:

If as a community we are prepared to lead others through the experience of learning to cooperate, dealing honestly with painful prejudices and tensions built into this society, and learning to bend enough in times of need so that the whole is more flexible and resilient, we will be able to do more than control our own community. We will be able to influence larger sections of the city, bringing together an array of potential allies.

Further movement within the system around us, so laden with conflict-producing tensions, cannot happen without an alliance. People must come together, moving out of their isolation, to challenge conditions which exploit us.

What we have described [in this recent history of Boston] is changing relationships, between people of color and white folks; between have-nots and have-a-lots; between men and women. While all these changes have been going on within the community of color, similar changes have been occurring to many other groups. . . .

The chain of change is still being forged.68

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Richard Sobol photo.
FOOTNOTES

3. For a further comparison of these two sections of Boston and explanation for the South End's tolerance, see James Green, "Learning from the South End's Ethnic Tradition," *Boston Phoenix*, June 24, 1975.
8. King's 20 percent can also be compared to the 26 percent of the white vote gained in Philadelphia by Wilson Goode, a black candidate considered for more "acceptable" to white voters because of his moderate positions and because he had been preceded by six previous black mayoral candidates. *Boston Globe*, November 16, 1983, p. 3, and Robert A. Jordan, "King's Defeat and the Racial Hurdle," *ibid.* November 17, 1983, p. 29. J.D. Nelson, King's campaign manager, thought the candidate had been "hurt badly" among white voters by his "apparently unintentional statement" that the late Catholic Cardinal had made anti-Semitic remarks. *Ibid.*, November 16, 1983, p. 34. Charles Smith, an activist black minister close to King, also thought that this "faux pas," as well as controversial comments favorable to Fidel Castro and Yassir Arafat, cost the candidate white Catholic votes.
35. Ibid., pp. 219-220.
36. Ibid., pp. 219-220.
39. Ibid., pp. 223-224.
42. Ibid., p. 185-194.
45. Golden and Mehegan, "Changing the Heart of the City," 69-70, 72, 74.
46. Ibid., p. 85.
55. Quotes from Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 121. Though Goodwyn sees the ways in which populist economics caused problems for black farmers, he does not fault the movement for failing to address racism within its own ranks, perhaps because he believes that Southern white populists were not aware of "their own participation in a caste system" that subjugated blacks. The problems resulting from the failure of radicals and reformers to con-
August 27, 1983, Rally on 20th Anniversary of Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech at 1963 March on Washington. James Green photo.
AMERICA'S NEW URBAN POLITICS:  
Black Electoralism, Black Activism

James Jennings

In recent years the number of blacks participating in electoral politics has increased rapidly. The Joint Center for Political Studies reported, for example, that 600,000 Blacks registered between 1980 and 1982; and the number of black elected officials nationwide rose by 8.6 percent between July 1982 and July 1983. Some observers have reported that by the time Jesse Jackson's bid for the presidency is over, anywhere between 1 and 2 million new minority voters will have been registered. In this context of increasing black political participation, a new kind of electoral politics is unfolding in black communities.

There are many examples of black electoral activism substantially different than just a few years ago. The election of Eddie James Carthan in Tchula, Mississippi, Barbara Mouton in East Palo Alto, California, Harold Washington in Chicago, and Gus Newport in Berkeley, California, illustrate a politics quite unlike what has been usual in post-World War II American cities. The black and Latino vote for New York City mayoral candidate Frank Barbaro in 1981 should also be viewed as distinct from recent minority political behavior in the American city. The mayoral candidacy of Mel King in Boston in 1979 and 1983, and William Murphy in Baltimore in 1983, as well as the budding organizations of progressive black political independents like elected officials Al Vann and Roger Green in Brooklyn are
additional examples. On a national level the voter registration efforts of Reverend Jesse Jackson also reflect the emergence of a new kind of black politics with a strong "leftist" bent.

It is largely due to this development that it is necessary to describe two "faces" of urban politics today, each representing different sets of issues, actors, orientation, and style. One "face" of local government is quite traditional. It basically seeks to maintain the particular arrangements of wealth, power, and influence which have characterized major American cities since World War II. Initially, the important actors in American local politics were private interest groups, the federal government, and mayors and their machines. In the late fifties major public service unions were added to this "urban executive coalition." Although that "coalition" gave some concessions to blacks and to other aroused citizen groups which black political movements inspired, institutionalized membership in the ruling partnership was never offered, even after the tumultuous sixties. Local government did not invite blacks, or the poor, to join the partnerships of the powerful; instead, temporary political arrangements and reforms were offered. As we know today, these reforms have not resulted in the replacement or qualitative change of the ruling urban executive coalition. Thus, in almost every major American city, the interests of blacks and the poor are treated as minor concerns by private and public sector leaders. Quite logically, the nature and organization of local American politics encourages elected officials to respond more readily and effectively to organized groups wielding a large degree of wealth, money, and power, rather than to blacks and the poor.

Black electoral efforts under the traditional framework basically seeks access into the structures of wealth and power; these attempts, successful in some cases, historically allowed black officials to call upon white power brokers for favors, or concessions to the black community. Thus, some blacks were elected because they appealed to voters not as political leaders but rather as managers of patronage or as developers of cooperative partnerships with the corporate sector.

Unlike traditional black politics, the new progressive electoral activism in the black community is not necessarily focusing on access, or patronage. Progressive electoral activism seeks to assault the city halls of America, not for the relatively few jobs that might be available by attracting downtown developers, but that to implement public policies which would have meaningful impacts on issues such as black unemployment, education and the quality of life.

The emerging progressive face of electoral politics in the black community, then, focuses on the well-being of people regardless of its effect on the executive coalition's political stability. Specific electoral activities under the two faces of urban politics may be similar in some cases; both, for example, call for mass political participation, voter registration and voting as a means of holding government accountable, and the mobilization of voter support for candidates of choice. But while the thrust of traditional electoral activism is to secure benefits from established interests, the alternative is to attempt to dislodge the holders and controllers of wealth; it is to force a more equitable distribution of the wealth created by the people of America. Progressive political activists raise local issues within national and international contexts. Progressive activists understand the fiscal and conceptual links between the militarization of American society and the quality of life in the city. Under the progressive banner, nuclear proliferation, business investments in South Africa, and military adventure in Central America become local issues.

That traditional politics has failed to meet the needs of ordinary citizens is most evident when we look at urban black communities. Indeed, a depressed socio-economic status has consistently characterized black city life for generations; and, conditions are worsening. Due to the absence of a commitment to eradicate poverty and racism, and to shifting political winds within stale conservative-liberal debates, blacks and the poor are losing even the small, token gains made in the sixties.

The failures of traditional local politics in the black community explain partially the exciting character of the Jesse Jackson presidential campaign. Jackson's run for the presidential
nomination is important, and should be encouraged, because it allows a forum to the millions of blacks and Latinos who have rejected political participation supportive of the status-quo in this country. This is one reason the campaign will pressure the Democratic Party — before and after the national convention — to remain accountable to anti-Reagan sentiment in the country. Very importantly, the Jackson campaign also provides a “conceptual linkage” between the progressive electoral efforts of black communities in the North and South. The new participants whom Jesse Jackson is helping to bring into the electoral arena have great potential — due to their structural position in American society — to recognize as their fundamental interest the development of an independent, progressive politics which challenges the basis and system of wealth in this society.

Traditional electoral politics is essentially a “buffer” process. It keeps the poor, the working class, and especially, blacks from effectively confronting “private” decision makers. Even when public leaders are well-intentioned and seeks to represent the interests of the powerless we find that their effectiveness is severely limited.Traditionally organized political participation, as a matter of fact, serves as an impediment thwarting mass-based movements in the electoral arena. Progressive electoral activism seeks to transform “buffer” processes into arenas of conflict between the poor and working class and those controlling the distribution of wealth. Traditional electoral activism seeks to manage this natural conflict in such a way as to render it innocuous to interests which control wealth and power; leadership operating under this framework perceives itself as a controller, rather than representative, of those on the bottom of America’s socioeconomic ladder. This leadership uses minor or non-systemic patronage inducements to satisfy the wants of the populace at various levels of society. Traditional electoral leadership behaves as broker between powerful partners of the urban executive coalition and the citizenry.

The questions on a city’s public agenda within the confines of traditional local politics are well-known and repetitive throughout urban America: How can we attract big business for “downtown” economic development? How can we build more office space and high-rise luxury hotels? In effect, how can we make life easier for those who don’t live in the city but who control the city? Which services can be reduced in order to relieve the pressures of the partners of the executive coalition? How can the public schools become more responsive to the needs of the business community? These are important questions under the old face of local politics.

When progressive activists enter electoral politics, new questions are raised. There are no “solutions” to social and economic problems at the urban level if there is not a concern for the “giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism.” Issues are not approached exclusively within a technocratic or managerial framework. They are molded and raised in ways which seek to empower blacks, the poor, and what Jesse Jackson refers to as the “locked out!” Only through the empowering of those on the bottom can racism, materialism, and militarism be overcome.

America has reached a stage in which the electoral arena — especially at the local level — will be ever more crucial in challenging groups holding and managing wealth in this country. Black-led progressive campaigns are introduc-
ing and leading this new force in American politics. Black electoral activism will influence political coalitions at the local level, and particularly black-Latino political relationships. It will also encourage public debates and discussions of issues usually not raised in local electoral campaigns. This is not to suggest that the electoral arena is the only place where struggles for justice and equality will crystallize; but increasingly activists are recognizing the potential of electoral forums to raise new issues and questions and to heighten levels of political consciousness among the urban citizenry.

In various ways, for instance, the Mel King candidacy in Boston had a leftward impact on that city’s mayoral race, both in 1979 and in 1983. King’s campaign in Boston forced all the mayoral candidates to take a position on “linkage,” i.e. holding downtown developers responsible for the maintenance of neighborhood housing. His candidacy also made the problem of racism a major issue in the mayoral campaign of 1983. Jesse Jackson is having a similar effect on a national level. As an advocate and spokesperson for the millions of “locked out” citizens, Jesse Jackson is forcing other Democratic Party presidential hopefuls to take stands on social issues that they would otherwise ignore. Reverend Jackson’s in-

sistence on the undemocratic nature of the Democratic Party selection rules, for example, has become a quiet but powerful campaign issue. His approach to various foreign policy matters has had a leftward impact on the debates among those seeking the Democratic Party nomination for President.

Many of the theoretical questions posed today result from the emergence of progressive electoral activism in the black community and have been raised by black political activists in recent periods of protest. Malcolm X, for example, discussed electoral activism as a tool for black political advancement in his “Ballot or Bullet” speech in 1964. H. Rap Brown discussed the potential and possibilities of black electoral efforts in the late sixties. In fact, within the last twenty years there have been sporadic electoral efforts suggesting the movement which is emerging today. Now for the first time what is being described as “progressive” politics can be clearly differentiated from the “traditional” politics which has dominated the black community, and the American city, since World War II. This is why today black intellectuals and activists on the left, as well as the black underclass, are beginning to reconsider and accept electoral participation as a useful tool for meaningful change.
Examples of progressive electoral accomplishments cited earlier generally illustrate the crucial role of black political leadership in the development of the new kind of politics at the local level. As suggested earlier, this is a logical extension of the socio-economic status of black urban life. It is based on the fact that "Blacks are at the center of basic conflicts in most northern cities... They constitute the racial group whose interests and activities have been most antagonistic to established institutions and better off strata." It is the black community which has most to gain from raising fundamental social and economic questions of American society. Blacks will be in the forefront of questioning the values and assumptions which underly our society because the contradictions between these values and socio-economic realities are most evident in black communities. As James Boggs explained, "Even though Black Americans are a minority in the United States, they represent a great threat to the American system as the African majority represents to the system in South Africa. Because once the bottom of a system begins to explode, the whole system is threatened." The development of the progressive face of politics signals the emergence of black political leadership as a major force in our society. The American Left especially, must note this fact. This is a leadership which has been thrust upon blacks by American history.

But this means that the clash between the old and new face of politics will take place also within the black community. Calls for black unity notwithstanding, black political activity in American cities today must be discussed by reference to this emerging conflict. Some black leaders will continue to pursue influence within traditional electoral activism; they will continue to ask, for example, how can we become a partner in the urban executive coalition?

Other black political activists are rejecting this framework. Black progressive activists are not interested in partnership with groups who seek to strangle and suffocate the city. They ask, instead, questions such as: How can people at a grassroots level be organized in order to protect themselves against the excesses of the urban executive coalition? How can white power structures be, not just reformed, but trans-formed? How can black, white and Latino youth be encouraged to participate politically in these important issues? How can community-based power, rather than personal influence, be developed?

The new politics in urban America is not focusing merely on winning elections. Electoral activism under a progressive framework is a means, a tool, by which to mobilize the black community against the wealth and power status quo. Is it not an attempt to share opportunities for exploitation; it seeks to develop public policy alternatives which will enhance the quality of urban life for all people. Under a progressive framework electoral activism is approached as an educational process, dialectical in nature. It is becoming an important tool by which to raise the political and social consciousness of blacks, the poor and working-class in the cities of America. This kind of electoral activism in black America reflects not just an extension of earlier struggles against racism and economic exploitation, but a new stage and a new front as well.
FOOTNOTES

2. The term “urban executive coalition” is borrowed from
3. Norman L. Farnstein and Susan S. Farnstein, *Urban
Political Movements: The Search for Power by Minority
4. James Boggs, *Racism and the Class Struggle* (Monthly

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The Editors

Boston’s Mayoral Election 1983: The Candidates

David Finnegan: Handsome, articulate radio
talk-show host, ex-president of the School Commit-
tee, the heavily favored mayoral front-runner with an
extremely well financed pro-business campaign em-
phasizing slick TV spots.

Raymond Flynn: Former state representative
from all-white South Boston, prominent first as a
leading spokesman for the anti-busing and anti-
abortion movements, more recently as a City Coun-
cilor as a champion of populist economic causes.

Mervin King: Former state representative
from the multi-racial (but majority white) South End, a
prominent long-time activist in campaigns for racial
and sexual equality and against militarism.

Lawrence DiCara: Anti-union, “good govern-
ment” City Councilor, generally liberal on social
issues, with funding second only to Finnegan’s.

Dennis Keaney: Irish former state representative
from heavily Italian East Boston, currently Suffolk
County sheriff, regarded as a moderate liberal; of-
fended nobody and excited nobody in his campaign.

Robert Kiley: Former CIA official, deputy
mayor, and head of the Boston-area transit system,
running for elective office for the first time on his
ability to run the city efficiently; he withdrew in
favor of DiCara before the preliminary, then en-
dorsed King in the final.

Frederick Langone: Long-time City Councilor
from the mainly Italian North End, the most conser-
ervative of the major candidates but often bewildered
in the debates.

Eloise Langer: Factory worker and Socialist
Workers Party protest candidate.

David Gelber: Member of Lyndon LaRouche’s
right-wing cult, running as an earnest and much
ridiculed champion of classical education and laser-
beam weaponry.

Boston has nonpartisan elections. Rather than
separate party primaries, there is one preliminary
contest; the two highest vote-getters then compete in
the final election. In 1983 the preliminary was held
October 15. King and Flynn finished in a virtual tie
with 29 percent each while Finnegan got 25 percent,
DiCara 9 percent, Keaney 6 percent, Langone 1 per-
cent, and Linger and Gelber 200 votes apiece. The
final election was held November 15, with Flynn
beating King by 65 percent to 35 percent.

Jim O’Brien
THE MEL KING CAMPAIGN AND THE BLACK COMMUNITY

Candice Cason

Less than one month after the inception of the Black Community Coordinating Committee, the BCCC opened a large office in a time-worn building central to the predominantly black neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan. The initiation of the BCCC was sparked by a desire to develop a campaign responsive to the needs and desires of the black community and to further develop leadership and initiative within it. The black community had to be organized to support Mel King’s candidacy, organized with a sensitivity and a specificity of which the central staff, preoccupied with the larger city picture, would not be capable.

Over the years, Mel King had practiced the politics of liberation and had voiced the concerns of the black community. The BCCC sought to highlight those politics and perpetuate their expression over the course of the campaign. The momentum for the development of the BCCC grew out of a house party for Mel King sponsored by a black community and labor activist. The thirty people in attendance were young community and labor activists and artists whose left-to-progressive sentiments coincided with King’s but, at the same time, also rendered them skeptical of electoral politics. Yet Mel was willing to sit on the hotseat at this house party and struggle with people about the importance of electoral politics as a tool for
political education and organization. He talked about the potential impact of the mayor on the day-to-day standard of living of city residents and explained his willingness to change his image somewhat in order to be regarded as a serious candidate in conservative Boston. As a result, King won many of those attending the party to active support of his candidacy.

The initiator of the BCCC, Ken Wade, a youthful but longtime black community activist and lifelong resident of Boston, sought and obtained the participation of eight to ten energetic and community-minded people. They would take responsibility to develop a strategy to win black community support for King and to build and lead committees in fundraising, field coordination, media, and religious community outreach, with support and guidance from the central staff of the campaign.

The political leanings of BCCC members in its initial stage were varied, but tended toward the left. As the BCCC expanded to include about fifteen people, it became truly representative of the broad progressive element in the black community. The boundaries of the BCCC were fuzzy; “members” were basically those people who had taken on large chunks of campaign work at the grassroots level, including committee leaders, ward coordinators, and office staff.

One explicit aim of the BCCC was to develop the black vote. The number of registered black voters early in 1983 represented only a fraction of the total number of eligible black voters. The BCCC intended to produce a dramatic upsurge in voter registration through voter education and agitation around the potential ballot power of the black community.

Another explicit aim was to win the black vote and thus ensure King’s victory in the primary. The BCCC proposed to present King’s record to the community in a manner which underscored his consistent role as an advocate for people of color. The BCCC projected that the distribution of campaign literature, some general and some aimed specifically at the black community, by large numbers of volunteers from within the community might motivate black voters to support King. The potential of openly supportive community leaders, particularly religious leaders, to win black voters, was gauged to be strong, and one participant in the BCCC took on the task of working with black religious leaders.

A third explicit aim of the BCCC was to generate financial support for King’s candidacy from within the black community. Two BCCC members assumed primary responsibility for the organization of house parties and other fundraising events.

An implicit aim of the BCCC was to increase black involvement in electoral politics. Voter registration, volunteer involvement in the campaign, attendance at electoral events, and voter turnout were used as gauges of electoral activity on the part of the black community. The initial task of the BCCC in its endeavor to heighten community involvement in electoral politics was to make the community receptive to the Mel King campaign. The black Left, comprising a small percentage of the black community, had thrown its support behind King, as the one candidate who had consistently voiced and fought for the concerns of the disempowered and disenfranchised consistently during his many years in the public eye. The progressive-minded and active progressive sectors of the black community, which together represent the bulk of the black community, were divided between King, as the most progressive candidate; Flynn, as the most progressive candidate thought likely to win; and “skepticism” — regarding both the possibility that a victory by such a candidate would really make a difference in their lives. Boston’s black community had not exercised its political power in years, and therefore lacked a sense of its force in sheer numbers, although Afro-Americans alone total 81,244 out of a total population of 562,994, and thereby constitute the second largest national group in the city.

Skepticism regarding King’s candidacy ran high in the community from spring through midsummer. At the Franklin Park Kite Festival in May of 1983, attended by thousands of Afro-Americans and West Indians, one red-shirted campaign volunteer was ridiculed by a black youth who said, “Aw, can’t no black man win in this city?” This youth’s statement was echoed in an article by Bay State Banner pub-
lisher Melvin Miller, who declared in his black community newspaper that a King victory was impossible.

The BCCC scrambled to lend credibility to the campaign in the black community, and to make a victory seem possible. Because of its insistence on working independently within the campaign structure and speaking directly to the concerns of the black community, however, the BCCC came to be viewed from within the campaign as a hostile and potentially dangerous body. The BCCC protested when the word “black” was struck from campaign literature aimed at the black community. It encouraged King to intensify his relations with black ministers. It pressed King to spend more time in the black community. The BCCC took the stand that King could not afford to take black community support for granted.

midsummer visit may have been the turning point for receptivity to the King campaign on the part of the black community. There was a significant increase in the number of volunteers from the black community following Washington’s visit. There also was a jump in the number of registered black voters. There was an upsurge in electoral activity in the black community, setting the base for a possible Mel King victory.

By the end of August, the King campaign faced the option of giving credence to the perception that it was pro-black, and defending its need and right to be, or walking around the issue. It opted to walk around the issue, and King opted to continue his walks around South Boston, East Boston, Hyde Park, and West Roxbury.

This strategy allowed King a victory in the primary, although it certainly was not the cause of his victory (in South Boston, East Boston, Hyde Park, and West Roxbury, the percentage of the vote that went for King was predictably small.) In the assessment and strategy sessions following the primary victory, a decision was made by the candidate and his campaign staff to focus efforts on the predominately white neighborhoods where King’s support was weak, and to limit attention and references to the black community. The Rainbow Coalition, the multiplicity of nationalities, age groups, and interest groups working with the campaign, was to be emphasized.

The concept of the Rainbow Coalition was a good one, but its implementation was weak.
There was an attempt to fuse the activities and interests of the various neighborhood and constituency groups, rather than to allow them to continue to grow together through common work towards a shared goal, the election of Mel King. The King Campaign prior to the primary was an explicit coalition, a coalition which clearly involved different interest groups, including the Black Community Coordinating Committee, Latinos for Mel, a Chinatown coordinating group, the Gay and Lesbian Committee, a women’s coordinating group, and various neighborhood committees. These interest groups worked somewhat independently within the campaign, determining strategic approaches to their constituency groups. The post-primary Rainbow Coalition was an implicit coalition, with the objective involvement of various interest groups, but without their subjective representation in independent decision-making bodies. The BCCC and its strategic focus on the black community was written out as that constituency was absorbed under “Central City” in the reorganization plan, which divided Boston into four large districts. Similarly, Chinatown was absorbed into the “Liberal” district, and the Latino community was divided between the “Central” and “Liberal” districts.

The explicit coalition which existed prior to the primary allowed for a strong and positive sense of identity to develop in the constituency groups. In the black community there was a strong sense of pride in the independent work of those areas to support King. The black community, powerless for so long in the face of the dominant culture, was beginning to feel a power truly equal to its size. The entire community had come alive. One could routinely hear groups of school children chant “Mel King! Mel King! Mel King!” while riding home on the schoolbuses.

The reorganization of the campaign into four large non-constituency-based districts following the primary allowed for the values and ideas of the dominant culture to take over. Moves were made toward standardizing outreach work and media, and creating literature which was supposed to be everything to everybody. Yet this literature spoke to no one in particular, except to those who felt most comfortable with a general approach — most of whom tended to
be white progressives. Voter registration in the black community continued to increase after the primary, but not at a rate equal to the exuberance felt in the community right after the victory.

The most positive aspect of the reorganization, and the general tightening of the campaign structure after the preliminary was that the clarity of structure allowed exhausted volunteers and staff to avoid the power struggles that inevitably ensue when a multiplicity of individuals and interest groups with various agendas compete in the context of a coalition. Campaign volunteers nonetheless became mere "cogs" in the wheel. There was no black and no white; it was all gray.

The candidate was colorful in these final weeks, however, so colorful that the grayness of the Rainbow Coalition could not neutralize the public's perception of King as a radical who stood consistently in favor of justice for the oppressed. Public comments made by King regarding various liberation struggles in Third World countries, while not politically astute, demonstrated an international consciousness which landed him on the side of social justice and consummate social change.

There were failures in the King campaign. Mel neither won the mayoralty nor was he able to build a campaign organization which clearly and consistently put forth the concerns of its "rainbow" constituents. Yet these failures did not render his campaign a vain attempt to achieve the impossible. The fact that the Rain-

bow Coalition continues to exist and struggle around the issues of real representation for its membership, that the numbers of registered voters in the black community rose from an average of around 46 percent to just under 75 percent, that new leadership was given an opportunity to influence the black community, and that a new organization was conceived in the black community out of the campaign, made King's efforts a people's victory and a victory for Boston's black community. The sentiment voiced by approximately seventy black campaign workers to form a black community organization can be seen in part as a reaction to the stifling of semi-independent activity in the black community over the course of the campaign, and particularly in the post-primary Rainbow Coalition. It can also be seen as a manifestation of the general need for independent organization among minority nationalities, whose cultures are always subject to subordination, intentional or unintentional, by the dominant culture.

Candice Cason was a member of the Black Community Coordinating Committee during the Mayoral campaign of 1983.
Mel King Runs for Mayor of Boston
or
Talk about a Dark horse
or
You think Paul Revere had it Rough?

Listen my children
To the historical episode
Of when in the city
of Boston strode
A Dark Rider without a horse

The city was gripped in whiteness
The good people of the city
were frozen into stiff effigies
Men wore white sheets there!
But then in the distance
could be heard
The cracking of the ice
caused by the footsteps
Of the Dark Rider

without a horse.

The muted militants slept
Under a blanket of snow
dreaming of past struggles
And Black children had
to fight off a hail storm
of stones
when they tried to go to school
But louder and louder over
the howling wind of oppression
Could be heard the voice
of the Dark Rider
Saying this is your city too!

A child was overheard to say
Mom, there's something happening
out there
The women who had been
locked away in Day Care Centers
Marched to take back the
night
And the Dark Rider without
a horse
kept on coming
The media had to raise colored
   pens
to their white paper to declare
He is moving on to
   challenge
Our Mr. White

The Dark Rider without
   a horse
strode down the center of the
   city
Saying Wake up everybody.
And in his hand (this is
   truly amazing)
Was not a sword
   but the tail end of a rainbow
Made up of Blacks, women
Whites, who undergone blood
transfusions of humanity, Hispanics
And reawakened militants

There was a surge of the
   color of people power in
the white city
And we all knew that this northern Place
That had been frozen in fear
battered by waiting storms
   of repression
And gripped by whiteness
Would be changed forever
by the burning presence of
   That rainbow
And would for a long time
to come hear the echo
of the footsteps
of the Dark Rider
   without a horse

Brenda Walcott, 1980

This poem was written shortly after Mel King’s 1979 race for mayor
of Boston.

Eilen Shub photo
WOMEN HOLD UP MORE THAN HALF THE RAINBOW:
Notes on Feminism and the Mel King Campaign

Margaret Cerullo and Marla Erlien

Even as his record of militant opposition to busing was being pushed into the background, Ray Flynn remained well known to feminist activists in Boston throughout the seventies and eighties. A leader of the anti-abortion movement, in 1979 Flynn cosponsored an important bill in the Massachusetts legislature designed to cut off public funding for abortion. In fact, the struggle against “Doyle-Flynn” has been a major focus of reproductive rights activity in Boston and in Massachusetts since that time. While the anti-Medicaid provision of the bill was struck down by the Massachusetts Supreme Court, as a result of Doyle-Flynn women state workers are still today denied health insurance coverage for abortion.

Flynn’s opposition to reproductive rights has been consistent and thorough, embracing both material and symbolic dimensions: in addition to sponsoring the Doyle-Flynn amendment, he has voted in the legislature against allowing birth control and birth control information for minors; and during his tenure on the City Council he introduced annual legislation to establish “Right to Life Day” and “Right to Life Week” in Boston. Behind his opposition to reproductive rights, Flynn built up a solid record of opposition to women’s independence and to gay and lesbian rights — voting against the ERA and gay rights legislation, against a range of affirmative action measures, even against the right to women to con-

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continue to use their own last names after marriage! In short, it was not that Ray Flynn was weak on women’s issues going into this campaign; he was and has been a symbol of anti-feminist backlash in this city and this state.

Mel King, on the other hand, had compiled a 100 percent rating from NOW for his voting record in the Massachusetts House (in contrast to Flynn’s 10 percent — based on a single vote in favor of girls’ sports). He was known for his sponsorship of the ERA, his unswerving support of abortion rights, and his efforts to increase funding for daycare, AFDC recipients, and children’s services. But Mel’s alliance with feminism went deeper than his voting record.

Mel King has a history of an active and supportive relationship to the women’s movement in Boston. He has been a long-time advocate for the battered women’s shelters. He supported black feminist efforts to generate awareness of the sexist as well as racist dimension of the murder of the thirteen black women in Boston over a six-month period during 1979. When organizing to defend Willie Sanders, a black man falsely accused of rape, coincided with mobilization for Take Back the Night one year, Mel worked to link the two struggles — helping to keep concern about violence against women alive in the Willie Sanders organizing and working to build support for Take Back the Night, at which he was always a familiar presence. He has, indeed, consistently been present at feminist marches, forums, and events, and has stood for the vision that the struggles against sexism and racism are allied. In short, unlike most politicians, Mel King is not only strong on “women’s issues”; as a result of his history he shares the language, the analysis, and the vision of change of the women’s liberation movement.

Given the dramatically opposed histories of the candidates on women’s issues two of the most puzzling issues of the Boston mayoral race emerge. In fact some of the most troubling issues of the campaign appear when it is considered from a feminist vantage point. First, regarding the King campaign, Mel’s strength in feminist contexts was not matched by either highlighting his positions on women’s issues in the bulk of the campaign literature as a key difference with Flynn or by a decision to appeal to women as women. Second, and related to this, despite the centrality of women’s activism to the King campaign organization, and despite the substantial presence of feminists at every level of the campaign (except the very top), feminism as such was not a public presence within it. This is perhaps especially striking in contrast to the high visibility of lesbian and gay issues and a lesbian and gay presence within the campaign.

An evaluation is needed from two perspectives. First, we will explore the reasons for the weakness of feminism in the King campaign and whether the campaign incurred losses by failing to make women’s issues central to the public debate. Second, the campaign must be evaluated as a movement-building effort as well as an electoral phenomenon. It provides an opportunity to explore the prospects for feminism in coalition politics, particularly in coalitions where race is the focus. Seem from this angle, the campaign raises the more general question of how the participation of feminists in coalition efforts can strengthen the women’s movement as well as strengthen — and influence — the coalitions we enter. Before we turn to these questions, however, we must take up a related issue: the troubling question of “What’s left?” in 1984.

What’s Left?

Sometime after the preliminary it was said — even on the Left and within the King campaign — that it was unfortunate or confusing or even exciting that there were “two progressives” running for mayor. Certainly this was the view preferred by tenant activists who supported Flynn, and a view that even the left media outside Boston commonly repeated. It is a view that reveals not only a white racist perspective, but a male-dominated and heterosexist one as well. It reminds us of the legacy of a Left which has traditionally sought its legitimacy from white working-class men. The question of language is here — as always — political. How we understand what’s “progressive” or what’s “left” is contested terrain, and the campaign helped to clarify the stakes.

Given Flynn’s history and his rootedness in the concerns and culture of his traditional South Boston Irish working-class constituency,
repackaging himself as a progressive was not a simple task. As someone who had stood against the aspirations of blacks, women, youth, lesbians, and gays, the basis of Flynn’s “progressive” image lay with his “populist” antagonism to the rule of wealth and special privilege.

Two factors contributed to his success in projecting his new image. First was the complicity of the mainstream media, which took as its explicit theme after the preliminary the similarities between the two mayoral candidates, a position which required the active suppression or reinterpretation of Flynn’s past. With regard to reproductive rights, Flynn’s campaign position became that, despite his personal opposition to “choice,” he would not use the office of mayor to deny women access to abortion in the city. His history as a leader of the still-powerful anti-abortion forces in the state was so effectively erased that in the final weeks before the election it was common to meet women who had never associated Flynn, the “progressive” candidate, with the author of the Doyle-Flynn bill.

Secondly, as one of the best local commentators pointed out, while the bulk of Flynn’s firm support (according to pre-election polls) was coming from social conservatives, it was “left-oriented activists” with social democratic leanings who both ran the campaign’s day-to-day operations and supplied many of its ideological foundations. It was they who helped Flynn to outline a series of anti-discrimination positions which cast issues of race, gender, and sexuality as issues of economic discrimination. Based on his record as a tenant advocate in the City Council, they portrayed Flynn as the advocate for the victims of economic discrimination. Because the mayoral race pitted Flynn’s populism directly against Mel King’s vision of social change, it underlined what distinguishes progressive politics in 1984 from such a “populist” stance.

On the surface their platforms on women’s issues — with the critical exception of reproductive rights — appeared similar. They both supported women’s equal access to jobs, housing, and services. But the distance between the candidates was most telling when each had the opportunity to bring their analyses and understanding to the issues. They had this opportunity at the Women’s Nights sponsored by the Women’s Alliance for the Boston Elections (WABE), feminist forums which, significantly, commanded the presence of all the mayoral candidates during both the preliminary and the final. The issue of sexist violence was both typical and revealing.

Where Flynn saw hiring more women police officers as a way to answer violence against women, Mel spoke of training and intervention to change sexist and homophobic behavior. Where Flynn spoke of equality for women, Mel King talked of empowerment. When asked to explain how they understood sexism at one forum, Flynn spoke of the need to treat women with respect, while Mel King named men as the problem: “sexism,” he explained, “is when one group of people — namely, men — oppress another group of people — women.” These are not “simply” differences of style and rhetoric, as some Flynn supporters would have it, but political differences of substance. It was Mel’s continued willingness to name and confront male power publicly, his direct affirmation of the analysis of the women’s liberation movement in public forums like these, that drew so many feminists like ourselves, long alienated from the electoral arena, into his campaign. At stake here is the language and therefore the visibility of the social movements which put many of the issues of this campaign on the political agenda, and the role of those movements in shaping the future of the city.
The translation of the problem of sexist violence into the need for more women police officers, to continue with our earlier example, loses the feminist analysis of the connections between violence against women and tolerance for normal everyday sexist behavior. As a result, the kind of education and political leadership necessary to address the sources of the problem get lost. The point is a general one. While Flynn was willing to provide services that would implicitly ease the effects of sexism and racism, Mel King cast his programs in terms which identified the causes. If Flynn provided a platform which favored rehabilitation of public housing, to take his strong card, Mel King identified the deterioration of public housing as sexist and racist: as female-headed and minority families become the vast majority of those living in public housing, standards of upkeep on the projects decline.8

Thus, the populist strategy of reducing all issues to economic ones, thereby marginalizing racism and sexism, enabled Flynn to claim to speak for all the people, while Mel was cast as the advocate of particular interests (those of blacks). Similarly, by denying racism and sexism as sources of division among people, populist strategies label those who raise them as divisive.

Women and the Defense of Neighborhood

While the critical, left-leaning media did challenge the racism of Flynn's claim to embody the "people's" perspective, his history as a leading opponent of women's rights did not emerge as a counter to his populist claims.9 Even Flynn's racism was invoked by the Left largely in terms of his history. Yet it can also be seen in his present defense of the neighborhoods. Accepting Flynn's identification as a defender of the "quality of life" of the neighborhoods, against the "interests" of downtown development given free rein by incumbent mayor White, reveals a superficial analysis of the powers at work in the neighborhoods. Within such formulations, the threat to the quality of life represented by the closed, racist, and patriarchal character of Boston's white neighborhoods remains unchallenged, unexposed.

And, yet, the Left is vulnerable to such perspectives. We inherit a legacy of community organizing which has had difficulty in identifying the significance of gender, of male power, within the communities it organizes. If anti-racist organizing has pushed the need to recognize the power of racism within the neighborhoods, the experience and perspectives of the autonomous women's movement have had less of an impact on left community organizing.

Feminist organizing has often found itself standing against the neighborhoods, as, for example, in the need to establish battered women's shelters and to help women move out of neighborhoods whose traditional norms are complicit with battering and other forms of women's subordination. For lesbians and gay men who have grown up in neighborhoods or communities where family norms predominate, "coming out" often required leaving them. One of us, poll-watching on election day in the Italian North End, noted an unavoidable theme of conversation. The North End (becoming increasingly gentrified) wasn't "a community any more like it used to be when it was all Italians." This author felt little nostalgia as I recalled my childhood experience of such a community at a time when, as one man described it, "everybody knew everybody's business," and "no kid could make a move without a dozen adults watching, ready to descend to the streets as if they were the parents." The options for girls and women especially in such communities were so tightly controlled that I had a moment of elation to think that the power of the parents might be weakening — even as I realized that the alternative to traditional community controls has been more often anti-social violence and insecurity than new forms of solidarity.

Let us state directly the political problems we inherit from left traditions of community
organizing. To what extent has such organizing identified the power against the neighborhoods, but not the power within them, specifically the power of heterosexual, racist, and sexist norms? How can we both base ourselves within and defend traditional communities and neighborhoods while carrying a challenge to the existing power structures within them? Without strong, autonomous, constituency-based structures, neighborhood organizing threatens to submerge important power issues.

Neighborhood vs. Constituency

The decision of the King campaign — after the preliminary — was to reconceptualize the city in strictly neighborhood terms and to drop or de-emphasize constituency-based organizing. This directly affected the black and labor committees and, we suggest, also contributed to the failure of an autonomous feminist presence to emerge in the campaign. When — or how — this decision was made remains unclear. Its political implications were present most often in the experience of women, lesbians and gays, and as Candice Cason emphasizes, the black community as a whole. Yet, under the pressure of getting out the vote, they remained largely unarticulated, and have only begun to emerge in the post-campaign reflection.

The neighborhood-based organization of the campaign not only offered a structural barrier to the emergence of a feminist voice within it, but, related to this, seems to have contributed to reinforcing the traditional sexual division of labor in the community. When, for example, women dominated the fundraising committee in one neighborhood, they realized they were quickly cast in traditional roles — as hostesses at house parties or baking cookies and cleaning up at larger public events. And, while estimates
ran as high as 75 percent women involved in the day-to-day work of the campaign in the black community,¹⁰ men were disproportionately represented in the leadership and decision-making roles, though this was not a consistent pattern.

There were countervailing forces within the King campaign. Feminists working from the central office contacted all local coordinators with an offer of materials and a strategy for addressing women separately and directly. A checklist was prepared to help organizers identify places within the community where women gather, in order to make literature drops and figure out other ways to raise and confront women’s issues and concerns. This offer met with absolutely no response — no doubt in part due to the press of daily activity, overwork and understaffing, etc., as well as to the structural factors we are suggesting here. Nonetheless, it does indicate the low priority and visibility of women's potentially distinct political voice within the King campaign.

Racism and the Gender Gap

Strategically, the goal of making women’s voice more central to the campaign could be argued. Exit polls from the preliminary indicated a substantial gender gap existed. In addition to holding and expanding its black and Third World base, what hope the King campaign had of winning at that point rested on drawing some portion of the white vote away from Flynn. Yet the campaign thought about its prospects alternately in terms of a universal appeal to humanity (Mel) and in traditional urban political terms — viz., ethnic and neighborhood. What never emerged was a focus on widening the gender gap, a focus on attracting women’s votes as such. On the contrary, some campaign workers in the women’s evaluation sessions thought that, if anything, the campaign implicitly directed its appeal to middle-aged, white, working-class men.

That those men were least likely to vote for Mel is confirmed by the telephone bank and canvassing experience of numerous campaign workers across the white neighborhoods of the city. What people found, with a remarkable consistency, was that women, particularly women between twenty-five and forty-five, were most receptive to the appeal of the King campaign. Whatever the neighborhood norm (set by the men), from completely closed in South Boston and Charlestown to undecided in the Italian neighborhoods or affluent Beacon Hill and Back Bay, women were to the left of it. In neighborhoods where men would spit or sneer at the sight of Mel King literature, women would grab it with one hand while being pulled along by their man with the other. While this might simply be taken to reflect female norms of politeness, there is enough confirmation from the phone conversations with women that such common experiences reflected a deeper ambivalence among white women about their loyalties in this campaign. One lesson of the campaign points toward the need to analyze further how racism affects relations between white men and white women. If the experiences we have described confirm that women were more consistently open to the appeal of the Mel King campaign, then it appears that racism served to re-bind men and women — blocking women’s rebellion and ultimately producing the results of the final election in which no gender gap surfaced.

The Women’s Committee of the Rainbow Coalition

What is important here is less the empirical fact of a documented gender gap than the political fact that the King campaign failed to even make an effort to appeal to women directly. Interestingly, it was a group of feminists, most
of whom lived outside Boston proper, supportive of the campaign yet external to the neighborhood structure, who took the initiative. As a result, a group of women came together, both from inside the campaign (central office and neighborhood) and from the periphery (phone bank volunteers) to develop literature and a distribution process to address women directly. The women’s committee was set in motion.

The problems facing the committee were already apparent. A tabloid on women, developed by a few feminists working in the central office, had not been widely distributed. The mechanism in place for literature drops, the neighborhood campaign structure, did not mobilize for the women’s literature. In one community, the tabloid simply got lost. It was clear that a focus on women was not a priority.

When the committee suggested a mailing explicitly to women voters in Boston, contrasting the candidates’ records, the central office blocked the proposal, saying that no literature with such contrasts could be published by the King campaign. (This decision from the central office may be related to the earlier discussion of how a populist strategy casts those who raise power issues between people, like sexism, as divisive. As a black man, King was already put on the defensive to prove he could represent all people.) The women’s committee was forced to go independent of the campaign if the opposed histories of King and Flynn were to reach a wide audience.

The failure of the neighborhood structure to distribute women’s literature, coupled with requests from friends who worked in a hospital (where lively discussions were taking place) for just such literature, led the women’s committee to realize that if our goal was to encourage women to think of themselves as having an independent and distinct political voice, we should try to reach women where they were most free of community or family pressure. Here workplaces were key — particularly given the structure of women’s employment in Boston in large and concentrated women’s workplaces — the hospitals, insurance companies, banks, and universities.
Given the previously discussed structure of Boston’s white neighborhoods, women needed an alternative base and source of identification from which to gain support if they were to back Mel King and still live in their neighborhood. Yet the strategy of the campaign meant there was no organizational or labor back-up to target workplaces.

In the remaining few weeks before the final election, the women’s committee formed an independent group, the Women’s Political Action Committee, to advocate for feminist issues in electoral politics by endorsing candidates. The Women’s PAC sent a letter which contrasted the records of King and Flynn to most women in the city. Not only was this the first widely distributed women’s literature of the campaign, but it arrived in women’s mailboxes only a few days before the election, when most people were saturated with political literature and had probably made up their minds in any case.

We have been assuming in this discussion that the failure to highlight women’s issues was implicit in other decisions by the King campaign and that it hurt Mel electorally. We must now confront the possibility that a more conscious decision was made within the King campaign based on a different judgment about whether Mel’s differences with Flynn, particularly around the issue of abortion, would help or hurt him with the electorate.

If this was so, it most likely resulted from the combined pressure of the more conservative, religious elements of the black community in Mel’s coalition as well as the sexist blindness with says “neighborhoods” but sees “men.” But it is hardly a sufficient explanation. Feminists must still ask some hard questions about our failure to push against the structural barriers we have identified. At least two factors suggest themselves. First, identifying with and working within the neighborhoods in which people live clearly had some positive attractions. Many feminists active in the King organization speak excitedly of beginning — often for the first time — to speak to their neighbors. Yet, speaking to neighbors often meant dropping any challenge to the culture of these closed geographic spaces. Was the assumption that feminism cannot live in the neighborhoods? A discussion is needed about what inhibits our ability to keep feminism central to our political activity.

Second, what legitimacy do we give feminist concerns in a coalition whose moving force is anti-racism? Historically, it has been black feminists who have challenged the idea that feminism is relevant only to white women, and who have addressed the obstacles that have kept black politics and feminist politics at odds. The absence of an autonomous black feminist voice within this campaign was one of its most striking — and surprising — features. Like feminists, black feminists were active as individuals but not as a distinct entity or voice. Given that Boston has been the site of significant autonomous black feminist organizing — most notably the Combahee River Collective — the failure of such a politics to emerge must alert us to the fragmentation and dispersal of our movement. It perhaps also indicates how difficult it was to raise feminism in a way that wouldn’t seem to distract from or compete with the anti-racist focus of the campaign.

Helen Keller (left) as she joined a suffrage march of over 10,000 women in Boston, 1914.

Despite all the problems we have identified, the Mel King campaign was not without positive significance for feminism in Boston and for the place of feminism in the Rainbow Coalition as it develops nationally. First, Mel’s presence in the mayoral race gave greater legitimacy to feminist issues in campaigns throughout the city. Because Mel’s campaign drew so many feminists into the electoral arena, it forced mayoral and other citywide candidates to address the feminist community of Boston.
directly. The Women’s Alliance for Boston Elections forums had a very lively grassroots and confrontational flavor to them, as traditional urban politicians of all stripes were challenged and asked questions by women which many of them clearly had never given a minute’s political thought to: how they would address the problem of sex-role stereotyping in the schools, why they were willing to march in St. Patrick’s Day parades but not Gay Pride, what services they would provide to meet the needs of lesbian and gay students in the Boston public schools, how they would address the problem of sexist violence. A School Committee candidate who attended the second forum admitted to being embarrassed and nervous when “asked publicly for the first time” about his position on abortion (opposed), which he had a great deal of difficulty explaining.

Women supporting Flynn came out as “Women for Flynn,” probably a response to Mel’s clear strength among feminists. And there were other circumstances, inside the King campaign, which helped women to see themselves as a group with a distinct experience and a distinct contribution. This was certainly true within the development of “Latinas for Mel King.” Even the formation of a group and the development of a focus on Latinas within the organizing in the Hispanic community was significant. Each time banners were made which read “Latinas and Latinos for Mel King,” discussions ensued (with women) about why it was necessary to add “Latinas” — weren’t they included in “Latinos?” Elena Rivas, the Jamaica Plain Latina coordinator, points to mistakes made by the King campaign from which feminists must learn, as we seek to broaden our base in communities throughout the city. The feminist letter mentioned earlier contrasting Mel’s record with Ray Flynn’s was translated directly into Spanish and distributed among Latinas in the city — causing alarm and concern among those inclined to support Mel rather than the reverse. Mel’s position on reproductive rights, translated directly from the English letter as “pro abortion” was interpreted to women by Flynn supporters on the streets to mean that Mel was in favor of requiring women to have abortions. Also from the English letter, the direct translation of Mel’s support for (and Flynn’s opposition to) women’s right to keep their own last names after marriage, unexplained to Hispanic women, simply made no sense. And, yet, Elena Rivas evaluates the campaign overall enthusiastically. “Mel’s commitment to ensure all people’s participation led many women to begin to see our ethnic and racial diversity as indeed a strength rather than a weakness, and helped Latinas to see themselves, often for the first time, as a group with a distinct and important contribution to make.”

Finally, what are the prospects for feminism in coalition politics? For many of us who participated, the Mel King campaign was a significantly different experience of coalition than others we’ve been part of. There was a genuine commitment in the Rainbow Coalition to acknowledge and confront difference and diversity. Even if it wasn’t fully successful in practice, the commitment itself marks a departure from more prevalent understandings of coalition, in which differences are submerged in the name of unity on a single issue or limited goal. Within the Rainbow, we were never asked to leave behind any part of our identities; we came as who we were, even if who we were made others uncomfortable. For many, it was an experiment which recognized that diversity can indeed be a strength and not a weakness.

And, yet, as we have been indicating, the campaign also pointed to the distance that still needs to be traveled if feminism is to live within coalition work. As women, we are always vulnerable to accepting self-sacrificing priorities. The urgency of anti-racist work nationally and in a city like Boston accentuates this vulnerability. (We forget, however, that
anti-racist work has a gender dimension.) The pressures and constraints of the electoral arena add another argument in favor of addressing only what will clearly aid in bringing out the vote. The very radicalism of a feminist perspective that goes beyond “equal rights” to include a challenge to the most basic ways we live our lives, itself sometimes paralyzes us. If feminist concerns are not to be marginalized or reduced to “manageable” equal rights demands, feminists must join coalitions as an organized force and not as individuals. This is the lesson we must take with us from the Mel King campaign into the Rainbow Coalition as it grows nationally. We must insist that women’s voices be heard and that a feminist commitment become central to defining the goals of progressive politics in the desperate future that we face.

FOOTNOTES

1. See Peter Dreier in In These Times, September 7, 1983 and again, October 5, 1983.
2. Paul and Wini Breines make this point in their letter to In These Times, October 5, 1983.
3. Despite these assurances, newly elected Mayor Flynn was prominent at the Right to Life rally in Boston on January 22, the anniversary of the 1973 Supreme Court decision which legalized abortion. He presented a Boston College philosophy professor with a citation honoring his anti-abortion work. Flynn’s continued public identification with the Right to Life movement clearly went beyond his insistence that his anti-abortion views were a “private” matter irrelevant to the conduct of the office of mayor.
4. An effort is underway in Massachusetts to amend the state constitution to restrict access to abortion. The amendment has already passed one session of the state legislature by a two-to-one margin. If, as is likely, it passes again this year, it will appear as a referendum on the November ballot. In the midst of this effort, which is clearly a test case with national significance, a new archbishop has been appointed to Boston, chosen in part, it appears, to have an impact on the abortion issue. Installed on March 23, Archbishop Law took as his keynote theme the “sin” of abortion, the “primordial darkness of our time,” emphasizing its connection to other issues of concern to the church: poverty, injustice, and especially nuclear war.
6. WABE is a multi-racial group whose goal is to strengthen women’s voice in the electoral arena in Boston.
7. See, e.g., Peter Dreier in In These Times, October 5, 1983.
8. It was interesting to watch how the press reported Mel’s statement on public housing. Only one of the major networks included the sexist as well as racist character of the decline of such housing. It was as if Mel could only speak of racism.

Margaret Cerullo and Marla Erlien are RA editors and worked on the King campaign.
My own experience in the Mel King campaign was mainly as a member of the Jamaica Plain committee, a neighborhood which is among the most racially integrated and least racially hostile in the city. The JP committee was one of the best organized and most effective in the city. There were literally hundreds of very committed organizers and volunteers, including many radicals. We were everywhere in the neighborhood, organizing our campaign detail by detail. We registered thousands of new voters, talked with neighbors we had never before met, and distributed literature, bumper stickers, and buttons to anyone who would take them.

The handmade rainbow buttons that quickly became the most identifiable emblem of Mel’s supporters helped to create a proud feeling of community. Recently, I stopped my car to help someone whose vehicle was stuck in a snowdrift. I had seen a red and white “Mel King for Mayor” bumper sticker. When he saw mine, by now tattered and worn, he smiled and said, “I knew there was a reason we were all keeping those on our cars.”

How people felt about Mel King winning or losing, or for that matter knowing exactly what was won or lost by the campaign are important questions to ask. What did winning or losing mean to people in Boston and around the country who cared about the array of
movements and communities that were represented by the Rainbow Coalition? What lessons were learned about the relationship between political movements and electoral activism?

On the surface, there is a refreshing clarity to these terms when the arena being scrutinized is electoral politics. Elections provide a context where winning and losing become very specific. The results are measurable — data can be quantified and analyzed for clues as to what exactly was won or lost, and perhaps why. But this impression is only a first one, and it can be misleading. Without minimizing the desire that people felt to win the election itself it is important to say that for people who participated in or observed the campaign, winning and losing meant far more than the number of votes tallied on October 11th or November 15th.

“Getting Respectable”

Mel King ran for mayor of Boston for the first time in 1979. When he came in third place, with 15 percent of the vote (ahead of David Finnegar, who was considered the “frontrunner” in the 1983 race), it sent shock waves through the city that had labeled him a “fringe” candidate. Aside from the fact that Mel’s blackness put him on the fringe of Boston politics and convinced many that winning was impossible, his dress was unconventional for a politician. He wore dashiks and beads. Many people believe Mel’s change of clothing between the 1979 and 1983 campaigns was the crucial shift that allowed more people to take him seriously as a candidate for mayor. Suits and bowties made Mel look like a respectable politician. That his change of dress may in fact have helped large number of people listen to what he was saying is not the point that I want to make here. I simply want to point out some of the pressures that socialized people in the campaign, consciously or unconsciously, toward values like “respectability.” I also want to point out that the issue of dress had an impact on the campaign in general, and not just on Mel. Because of a sincere desire to get people listening, all campaign workers were urged at a certain point to “dress well.” The people I worked with expressed some discomfort about telling people what to wear while doing voter registration, canvassing, or whatever. I certainly did. But for the most part, there were very few objections and a lot of sentiment that looking nice was important. If dressing up would help us to win, then we would do it.

How Mel or the campaign workers dressed was not all there was to it. Language too became an arena of potential controversy. It was common practice, throughout the campaign, for journalists to throw around words like “confrontation” and “adaptability.” Needless to say, the ability to conciliate was presumed more worthy of a mayoral candidate than a tendency toward “protest.” Ray Flynn was widely characterized as a populist grown wise with experience, with the background and desire to “heal Boston’s wounds.” Mel’s image, in contrast, was that of a strident demonstrator, a person with ties mainly or only to Boston’s black community who would be sure to alienate Boston’s more “moderate” voters. The reality that Mel had a multi-racial campaign in a city like Boston, and that there were few people of color, feminists, or gay activists in the Ray Flynn camp, did not often interfere with the power of these stereotypes. The characterizations are extreme, obviously, and they were sometimes expressed in more subtle ways, but the language used to describe the two men and the two campaigns betrayed a hierarchy of values.

An interesting example of an instance in which these perceptions backfired was Mel’s boycott of the first televised debate before the preliminary. The two candidates considered most “on the fringe” this time around — Eloise Linger of the SWP and Michael Gelber, a follower of Lyndon La Rouche — were intentionally excluded from the forum by the sponsoring League of Women Voters and the Chamber of Commerce. Protesting their exclusion, Mel refused to participate. Since this debate (and the two that followed) were Mel’s only chance to reach a TV audience, most people, inside and outside of the campaign, felt the boycott was a big mistake. It was a “confrontational” act. Wouldn’t it have demonstrated Mel’s “flexibility” to attend that debate and from there make a statement opposing Linger’s and Gelber’s exclusion? Instead, what hap-
pened was that the media for the most part treated Mel’s boycott of the debate as the most interesting and newsworthy thing about it. Mel King was everywhere in the press the next day. His act of “protest” was transformed into an admirable act of “principle.”

Not only were particular styles judged more or less respectable. Certain issues tended to raise eyebrows. Mel’s personal commitment to feminism and gay liberation, for example, rooted in years of active work for abortion rights, child care, gay rights legislation, etc., was not necessarily shared by everyone in the campaign. Despite a great deal of consciousness raising among campaign workers, there were a number of examples of discomfort and/or unwillingness to be publicly aligned with these issues or the people who raised them.

Here is one example. The night before the final election, I went to a “get out the vote” rally on the main street of West Roxbury, an upper-middle-class Irish neighborhood. There were a large number of Mel King supporters there. Each of the candidates for office trooped by to speak. Toward the end of the rally, there was a lull and the moderator asked City Councilor Dapper O’Neil, who had already spoken, to fill some time. O’Neil happily complied by telling people an “amusing” story about why he had worked so hard against a recent city ordinance called “the fair housing bill.” The amusing part was that he felt people should not be “forced” to have gay men or lesbians living in their houses. He reminded everyone that he had never been one of “those” politicians who buckles under organized gay pressure. (The assumption of his story, of course, was that every person at that rally agreed with his homophobic sentiments.) While doing sissy fag imitations, complete with limp wrist and high voice, O’Neil cited a questionnaire circulated by the Boston Lesbian and Gay Political Alliance as an example of the “gay conspiracy.” He mentioned two items in particular — one a question about support for openly gay police officers, the other about marching in the annual lesbian and gay pride march. At this point, the woman I was with (who was the lesbian and gay coordinator for the King campaign) shouted something to the effect that gay people didn’t want O’Neil anywhere near the march. Right away, two King supporters standing nearby insisted that she be quiet, saying repeatedly that O’Neil had
the right to speak. When O'Neil finished with his stories, we hissed, and were told again, quite impatiently, to shut up. Then the four of us walked away from the rally and talked about what had just happened. They insisted that everything we said or did while holding a "Mel King for Mayor" sign reflected on Mel and on the campaign. These two people felt that a large part of our contribution to winning was a refraining from being provocative or controversial in any way.

The desire to minimize controversy came up around other issues. There was, for example, a pervasive sense that talking directly about race relations to Boston's white working-class residents was difficult and provocative, that it was not a "winning strategy." It was an easy step for those people opposed to confronting whites to gravitate toward what I call a lowest-common-denominator approach: stressing economic equality and the responsible delivery of city services as the campaign's major concerns. Ironically, this approach was a strong feature of Ray Flynn's strategy.

Finally, several comments made during the course of the campaign by Mel — one that Fidel Castro had done more for the poor than Reagan, the other his offer to welcome Yasir Arafat to Boston — immediately generated the kind of controversy some people were doing their best to avoid. A campaign memo was circulated with suggestions about how to deal with people's emotional and often hostile reactions to Mel's comments. Although the memo discussed in some detail how to explain why Mel made these remarks, it concluded with the statement, "Remember, the campaign is not the forum to debate the issue of Cuba."

"Getting Serious"

Organization was another area where the pressure to move toward conventional electoral politics was felt. Internally, the campaign had been set up according to a system of dual structures: neighborhood committees and constituency committees. The neighborhood committees, as in any conventional campaign, used the geographic divisions of city wards and precincts to organize the daily work of registration, distributing literature, etc. The constituency committees, in contrast, were organized along the lines of larger political movements: black, Latin, Asian, labor, women, youth, gay and lesbian, elders, peace, etc. These committees did organizing in their particular communities, and also served as resources to and developers of the campaign position papers on a wide range of topics from crime to child care to health.

The range of ways of organizing people embodied a diversity of approaches to the definitions of "personal identity" and "community." The overlap of neighborhood and constituency organizing was intended to address people holistically, to recognize that identity is complex and that people perceive themselves and others in many ways simultaneously — as women, as young people, as lifelong residents of a particular neighborhood, as Asian-Americans, for example. The constituency model was the direct result of movement organizing. It was the organizational manifestation of a radical understanding of oppression and power. In fact, in many ways, the King campaign was the quintessential expression of progressive movements in the Boston area over a period of years.

Nevertheless, the practical constraints of trying to get someone elected mayor created pressure to work geographically. Getting people registered and out to vote was in the forefront of our efforts; it was urgent and tangible. It was possible to identify people who supported Mel according to where they lived, and maintain contact with them by phone or by knocking on their doors. Our meetings were overwhelmed by the details of this daily work: voter registration (who had the table and chairs), raising money (selling balloons and giving parties), and canvassing (this was endless). Additionally, many of the resources for identifying people citywide and systematically were organized geographically: police lists, voter registration lists, data from the election commission.

While there were a huge number of experienced organizers in the campaign whose background had been in social justice movements ranging from school desegregation to reproductive rights to disarmament (to name just a few), the reasons to organize people
along constituency lines — along the lines of political consciousness and identity — felt intangible to many people who wanted to win the mayor’s office in November. The dichotomy is a false one in some ways, as there was a great deal of convergence between the two organizational structures in some cases. For example, black constituency organizers worked largely in the black neighborhoods of the city, and the Latin and Asian organizers worked in their neighborhoods. This did not mean, however, that the spirit of constituency organizing — its potential for raising consciousness — was carried through; in fact quite the opposite. After the preliminary, when the constituency workers were directed to subsume their organizing under the rubric of geography, things started falling apart. In the case of the communities of color, the integration of constituency and neighborhood organizing looked effective because of the geographical definition of these communities. In fact, it was in reality no more successful than the attempts by the labor committee, which disintegrated completely, and the women’s committee, which left the campaign organization altogether to form a Women’s PAC, which they hoped would be a less frustrating way of continuing their work. When the election was over, there was widespread criticism that prioritizing neighborhood over constituency work had been a big mistake.

If it is possible to understand this organizational dilemma as a pragmatic response to an electoral challenge, it is perhaps easier to see how campaign decision making was affected by oppressive notions of what a “serious” campaign should be like. Just as concepts like “confrontation” and “compromise” expressed certain values, so too did “centralization” and “decentralization.”

The central staff was to coordinate the work of all the neighborhood, constituency, and other committees. To a certain extent, each committee functioned autonomously in defining and carrying out its work, but requests for written material and funding were channeled through the central office. (However, quite a number of committees did fundraising on their
own. In this fashion, they used the money in whatever way they thought best and circumvented the hassle of competing for funds with a central office chronically short on financial resources.) There was, of course, a delicate balance to be struck between allowing people to work independently in the communities they were a part of and knew well, and the need for overall coordination and direction of the campaign.

As the campaign progressed, especially after the preliminary election, winning felt so possible that it was easy to accept centralizing authority and decision-making power as more effective, and more "serious," than decentralized procedures (read chaos). This was a mistake. For example, after the preliminary, neighborhood organizers were directed to discontinue contact with their neighborhood media. We were told that all work with the media would be done through the central office. While it became increasingly important for the campaign to feed extremely consistent information to the press, the result of this particular decision was an awkward disruption of relationships that had been nurtured for months. In any event, the central media staff was too overworked to communicate with all the people who had previously connected to neighborhood activists.

In general, people experienced the move toward centralization as disempowering, though many also welcomed the sense that someone or something was in control. Importantly, most people did not feel that "getting serious" ended up providing the campaign with a stronger, more unified strategy. Lack of consensus among the central staff, confusion about how decisions were to be made, and lack of an effective means to incorporate grassroots input stifled any attempt to generate a wholehearted citywide strategy.

I raise these issues not to belittle discipline or leadership, but to stress the importance of developing them democratically and across the board. Every individual who cared about the campaign had ideas about what our strategies should be; the informal discussions were endless. Ideally, there should have been a way to tap the immense creativity that existed in the campaign more effectively. Doing so would have pushed us further along toward making Mel the mayor and making all of us leaders.

Considering the pressures, people did a remarkable job of resisting the negative aspects of "respectability" and "seriousness." People wanted to win the election very badly, but people wanted to win because they cared about ending oppression and participating in the process of empowerment that Mel represented. Putting a person into the mayor's office without making a statement about the "politics of inclusion" would have meant a hollow victory for most campaign workers.

The collective socialization process detailed above was a new experience for many radical activists. Deciding how to respond was and remains a thoroughly political question.

Where to draw the line? At what point did looking good, behaving properly, and talking about non-controversial topics deny people's motivations for getting involved in the campaign in the first place? What did winning and losing really mean? The answer to this question has to do with the radical education that was, consciously or unconsciously, a part of the campaign experience for every participant and observer.
Believing

Unquestionably, people who worked on Mel’s 1979 bid for mayor did so because of a belief in the important educational and symbolic value of the campaign. These motives are familiar — often articulated by radicals who choose to work on electoral races or on other projects considered “mainstream.” There is a hope that the discussions surrounding the campaign can be redefined in radical terms or at the very least pushed to the left. Mel certainly succeeded on this score; especially in 1983. The King campaign managed to set the agenda and tone of the entire race, pressuring Ray Flynn to respond by articulating progressive positions. Additionally, progressive candidates with a significant power base can operate as brokers — within political parties, government administrations — to win some concessions for “the coalition of the rejected,” to use a term coined by Jesse Jackson.

By 1983 in Boston, people were clearly motivated to join the campaign for reasons beyond its educational and agitational value. Undoubtedly, there were still many people who were deeply committed to the campaign but who did not believe that Mel could win. For some, this attitude resulted from the conviction that Boston was simply not ready for a black mayor. Of course, this sort of “pragmatic racism,” as Mel called it, created a self-fulfilling cynical disbelief in the ability of whites to be meaningfully anti-racist. For others, radicals especially, winning and losing were vaguely defined ideas. There is also a long list of defenses made by radicals against electoral failure, or even participation. Many of these defenses are based on legitimate concerns, including the conflict between working to elect a person and building a social movement, participating in the Democratic Party, compromising important principles for illusory or insignificant gains. This list expresses real ambivalence, grounded in an awareness of the gap between revolutionary ideals and the small steps we must take in the here-and-now. However, these defenses can be expressed as absolute prescriptions, and as such constitute a destructive and paralyzing purism. While some radicals were saying that nothing justified participation in the Mel King campaign, others were insisting that any effort, successful or unsuccessful, was “educational.” All opinions along this spectrum from ultimate purism to vision-destroying pragmatism were seized upon by observers wishing to cast doubts on the viability of the campaign. Being “idealistically” committed to a set of political ideas or to a democratic organizing process — rather than the single-minded determination to put an individual into elected office — was more fuel for those who chose to depict the King campaign as somehow not serious, not the real thing. Of course, this disparaging perception of “idealism” was used not only to attack Mel as a candidate, but to attack the campaign (and the movements it represented) for the promotion of a radical vision.
Ain’t No Stoppin’ Us Now!

Nevertheless, one of the hallmarks of this campaign was the palpable feeling that winning the election was possible, and crucially important, and up to us to make it happen. Public opinion polls (which were assumed to underrepresent our strength because of their exclusion of newly registered voters) and the response we got to day-to-day organizing convinced everyone that Mel had a real chance to win. Our determination was fueled equally by the knowledge that it was possible and the fact that many still believed it was impossible.

But the feeling went beyond even this. The campaign cultivated its own culture of diversity, pride, and human contact; one felt part of an almost spiritual sense of collective possibility. Wanting to win so badly meant taking risks — risking greater disappointment if winning were replaced by losing, risking the belief that this concrete, electoral gain was truly meaningful. The rainbow coalition’s historic victory in the preliminary meant a great many things: amazement for some, relief and intense excitement for others who had worked so hard, and especially enthusiasm for those who had felt little hope. It was a moment in Boston’s political life that deserves inclusion in the history books.

When we were finally defeated on November 15 there was bitter, bitter disappointment. For those people motivated solely by the desire to get Mel elected the final tally marked only resounding defeat. For others with a more encompassing vision the feelings on that day were mixed — a true sense of accomplishment as well as loss. All of these positive feelings were expressed at the party that followed. The rainbow coalition celebrated in a spirit more victorious than anything Flynn’s supporters could muster, with their conventional dance band and balloons. Mel’s supporters stretched a five-minute concession to a half-hour with their constant interruptions and chants. We were celebrating a campaign, and a candidate, whose success could not be measured by the final vote total.

Ellen Herman is a member of the South End Press collective and was a member of the Jamaica Plain committee to elect Mel King.

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LATINOS FOR MEL KING:
Some Reflections

Melania Bruno and Mauricio Gaston

For Boston's Latino community, as for the rest of Boston, the 1983 mayoral election was an important event. Much was at stake, much was gained, and much was learned in the process. The future looks a little brighter because of the work of the Rainbow Coalition and the campaign led by Mel King.

In order to present our observations we will first describe Boston's Latino community. We will then briefly sketch the group Latinos for Mel King, its organization, aims, and activities; we will discuss some events and processes which took place during the campaign which are particularly illustrative of political developments in our community. Finally we will share with you our thinking about the emerging political projects directed at Hispanics in the US, the forces behind them, and the stakes involved.

The Community

Boston's Latino community is more recent and somewhat smaller than those of other major US cities. Although a history sorely needs to be researched—there are a few projects underway—we know there was at least a Cuban and Puerto Rican presence in this city as far back as the nineteenth century: Jose Marti, for example, wrote about coming to Boston in the early 1890's to unite the "Cuba-Borinquen Club" into the Cuban Revolutionary Party. We have isolated narratives of our presence here throughout this century. But it was only in
the early 1890s to unite the “Cuba-Borinquen Club” into the Cuban Revolutionary Party. We have isolated narratives of our presence here throughout this century. But it was only in the ’50s that Puerto Rican ex-farmworkers began to settle along Washington Street and Shawmut Avenue in the South End. There were a few hundred families then, and we have rediscovered that quite a few knew Mel King from those days. (He helped prevent forced relocation of Puerto Ricans out of the neighborhood, and he helped start the first Puerto Rican baseball team.)

In the ’60s the community began to establish more permanence, a process that included the initiation of struggles for civil rights and for better housing, education, and health. It was only late in that decade that popular and reformist organizations began to be built, incipient institutions began to be developed, tentative alliances established. In the context of the War on Poverty, social service agencies clearly run by Latinos and aimed at our community began to appear and to assume the role of intermediaries between the community and the city’s power structure.

Displaced by urban renewal, and augmented by new migration from Puerto Rico, New York City, and Cuba, people then began to settle in other neighborhoods in the city, a process which continued throughout the 1970s. Thus, neighborhoods appeared in Dorchester, Jamaica Plain, Mission Hill. Boston’s Latino population more than doubled between 1970 and 1980, and the community is still growing. We are close to 10 percent of the city’s population at this point; there are nearly 50,000 of us.

Although voter registration rates before the campaign were low (47.1% in 1982, according to James Jennings), they were significant enough to tip elections; the Hispanic vote has begun to be courted by major politicians and mainstream political parties which thoroughly ignored it until recently. Hispanic political candidates began to emerge on the scene only in the last ten years, and only in 1983 did the first one actually get elected. If we compare this situation with that of New York City, for example, where the community’s history is older, richer, and more complex, where there is a longer tradition of both left and sellout leadership (and everything in between), Boston’s community is almost in political diapers.

As is the case with historical research, much empirical and analytic study needs to be done about our community, although there is much we already know. About 80 percent of us are Puerto Ricans, with the rest divided among other Caribbean and Central American countries. By far the largest percentage of Puerto Ricans are working-class, but there is a small but influential professional-managerial class, that includes some recent arrivals into the city. The Puerto Rican institutional base in the city has been the service agency, along with a few social clubs and churches. Politically, the Puerto Rican community is liberal to left, although the left wing proper has been in some disarray in the last few years. Because of their numerical preponderance and a recent history of struggle, most of the official leadership of the Latino community is Puerto Rican. The second oldest group among Latinos is substantially different: the Cubans. Although there were Boston residents before 1959, the majority arrived in various waves between 1959 and 1972. Cubans have the widest range of class division among Latinos. Although very small by Miami standards, there is a significant bourgeoisie which tends to own the businesses, from large corporations (like the Women’s World chain and some food import firms) to the smaller neighborhood stores and bodegas. They control the two Spanish weeklies, and thus exert influence in the community beyond their numbers. There are also professional-managerial and working-class sectors. It has a few hundred “Marielitos.” Politically, the community tends to be from conservative to the extreme right, although in recent years this last sector has begun to lose hegemony (in the past enforced with terror) over the community. There is a small but significant progressive movement in this community. Dominicans are the next largest group. They tend to be more radical and politically conscious, but because of problems with documentation and a political focus on the home country, they are less inclined to be involved in local politics. The more conservative elements among them, however, are beginning to be active in the local
electoral scene. The newest arrivals are Central Americans, a group which is already large and growing very fast. The majority are refugees from the current conflagration; they tend to be working-class or middle-class, very politicized, concerned about war and peace in their region of the hemisphere, and haunted by immigration problems. The “reaction in exile” is certain to become a presence, but is by far outnumbered by other forces.

The community has also gone through qualitative changes in the last few years, developing skills, acquiring greater self-consciousness and an economic base, and maturing its contradictions. In the mayoral campaign it would become clear that the tactical and strategic value of the Latino community to various political actors was much higher than the mere numerical strength in votes would indicate.

Latinos for Mel King

As the 1983 election approached, it was evident that an important effort aimed at involving the Latino community in the campaign had to be organized. A meeting was called in Jamaica Plain to which were invited a variety of activists in our community: fighters in the schools and trade-unions, activists in movements for Puerto Rican independence, racial equality, community control, non-intervention, and other causes. It included also the “recognized leadership,” which in Boston consisted mostly of directors of social service agencies, a few small businessmen (bodega owners), and some with prior experience in electoral politics. The group was largely Puerto Rican, as is our community, but included Dominicans, Central Americans, Cubans, and a couple of South Americans. Mel has friends and supporters in all sectors of our community, and from the beginning the aim was to involve as broad a cross-section as possible in the campaign. Achieving harmony was not easy by any means. There were even some activists in our group who had been fired by other activists, and both supported Mel. There were other tensions, as between men and women. This was not merely a practical exercise in group dynamics: theoretical issues about the nature of a cross-class movement within our community, the situation of various Latino nationalities (some privileged, others with a high percentage of undocumented people), and the promotion of various kinds of leadership had to be considered.

It was our aim to build a coalition within a coalition, one that could address the agenda of the campaign but also address our needs and insure that the voice of the Latino community was heard throughout the campaign. Although we had relative success on both counts, we also had difficulties on both counts, as we shall see. Initially, those who attended were few, but as the months passed the group grew in size.

During the early meetings, we decided to
develop a semi-autonomous organization in the campaign and to name it Latinos for Mel King. We wanted a structure parallel to the rest of the Rainbow Coalition in those four neighborhoods of Boston where Latinos concentrate (South End, Mission Hill, Jamaica Plain, Dorchester) with our own ward and precinct coordinators but with everyone participating in the larger coalition meetings as well. In this way, we could address issues of particular importance for our community as well as citywide issues. We could feel comfortable in a structure which was “ours,” analyze and act regarding the dynamics of Latino politics, while simultaneously building bridges to the larger movement. Priority precincts were targeted based on the concentration of Latino residents and on the voting records of the precincts for minority candidates and progressive referenda issues. While not every precinct in these four neighborhoods was covered, we eventually developed a fairly extensive and structured effort.

Besides building our structure, there was also work which was necessary for us to do as Latinos. We held meetings in our four neighborhoods to develop a program directed at our needs, which was incorporated in the campaign’s literature (we underused this excellent program when the election drew near). We translated campaign literature. We organized a neighborhood concert which was very well attended. We held numerous house parties in our community, including a pig roast held jointly with the Felix Arroyo campaign. We marched with Mel in the Puerto Rican Festival. We organized two “Walks for Mel King” through several neighborhoods, with banners and bands on a truck, which became important affirmations of our identity and later became one of the marks of the campaign as a whole. These walks were also a visual reminder that the campaign was a movement as much as a campaign. In our efforts we were nourished by the diversity and unity which the coalition was beginning to show. We organized a significant press conference to announce hundreds of Latino endorsements for Mel. We raised funds, raised consciousness, registered voters, and worked to build alliances. We were being ourselves, with strength.

Early on we relearned some of the problems with participating in the structures of power. Among the people we had looked to for help early in the campaign were a number of liberal activists with a long history of progressive involvement in various areas—such as health, housing, and human services—who had gotten state administrative jobs after the election of Michael Dukakis as governor. Informally, we called them the Dukakis people. This was a group with historical ties to Mel, broadly in agreement with his program, and who had demonstrated their willingness to take a risk. Not only that, but their new role in state government gave them additional power and prestige—the Dukakis administration was the first in this state to offer Latinos more than token jobs. When we approached them we found out that they were in fact unable to move politically because the politicians at the state level were requiring neutrality in the mayoral election from their “troops.” Since these liberal activists were important to politics in the Latino community, their distance from us made it hard to gain momentum. We were thus given concrete evidence that democratic reforms won from the state through struggle or electioneering can actually weaken popular efforts at the same time as they will strengthen them.

We were particularly careful to build alliances with the two campaigns of Latino candidates: Felix Arroyo and Grace Romero. Two years before, Felix had become the first Latino to reach the finals in a citywide election in the city of Boston. In the meantime, the black-initiated Campaign for District Representation had succeeded in transforming the City Council and the School Committee to bodies where some members were elected by district and some in citywide contests. Felix decided to run again for School Committee as a citywide candidate, believing that the climate had changed enough to make a Latino candidate viable for the entire electorate of the city. He was running on a moderate-progressive platform and had developed a well-rooted organization in the Latino community while attracting support from various other forces. Felix, and key members of his campaign organization were long-time supporters of Mel; there were, however, some who participated in his
campaign who were supporting other mayoral candidates, so there was pressure on Felix to stay neutral or side with others from the beginning. In many respects, his campaign was the major event in the electoral efforts of Boston’s Latinos; in the eyes of many it was more important than the mayoral election. We knew that good relations between Mel’s and Felix’s campaigns were crucial to maintaining a black-Latino alliance through the struggle, and we worked to foster them. We believe we succeeded reasonably well during the early months of the campaign, less well later, as we shall discuss. We held joint fundraising parties and joint voter registration drives, and we tried to keep open communications.

Grace Romero was less well known throughout the city, but had managed to build an impressive coalition in her largely black district and to mount an impressive race for the School Committee. She had decided to run for one of the districts rather than citywide. As a Honduran she was part of a less prominent sector of our community. We also worked on better relations with her group, cooperated during the Puerto Rican festival, and did some joint voter registration. Grace had connections with Dukakis’s wing of the Democratic Party machinery in her district and she had contacts in black political circuits. Because she was not running citywide, her campaign was not as central to Latino politics in the city as was Felix’s.

The Campaign

Latino community participation and support in the primary was concentrated on Mel King, Ray Flynn, and the well-financed favorite, David Finnegan. The composition of Mel King’s support among Latinos we have already discussed briefly. Finnegan’s support in the Latino community came primarily from people in the remnants of Mayor White’s political machine at the street level and from Cuban merchants organized in various organizations. Both Cuban-owned Spanish weeklies, El Mundo and La Semana, endorsed Finnegan in the primary. His support at this stage was composed, to no one’s surprise, of the most reactionary forces in our community (El Mundo is ardently pro-Reagan, but more to his right) and those forces which had traditionally “gone with the winner” and traded political support for patronage (jobs in Boston City Hospital, for example). Flynn’s initial Latino support was organized by Puerto Rican community activist Carmen Pola. A capable political operative with a history of militant reformism in housing and education, she had numerous contacts. As a fighter with a legitimate, although complex, claim to having defended people’s rights at times, she had some prestige going into the election, but was slow to build momentum.

The Latino vote in the primary was instructive. According to MIT’s Yohel Camayd-Freixas, “King won 40 of the 48 precincts with significant Latino concentration. That’s 83% of the precincts. He did not win easily, though: he had to battle in 21 of these 48 precincts.” In voting percentages this translated to two-thirds to 70 percent of the primary Latino vote for Mel, with Finnegan taking the majority of the other votes, Flynn following, and Larry DiCara (a mildly liberal city councilor) with a residue. Perhaps more significant than the numerical
outcome is the fact that by the primaries the community was intensely involved in the election; it was evident to those who had not seen it before that the elections were not the usual event this time around.

During the two-week voter registration period that followed the primary, Latinos for Mel King put special emphasis on signing up new voters, while sharpening the organization we had built before the primary. In the huge increase of new voters before the primary (total registration rose by 30 percent), Latinos were a relatively small percentage compared to new black registrants. In the post-primary registration, however, the percentage of Latinos among new registrants rose significantly, although we were not able to get accurate estimates. Our base of support continued to be community activists, social service agency personnel, and progressives from the various national groups, although the efforts of the “established” leaders were now important. Most impressive for us was the kind of political energy mobilized for this period. Old activists, who may have been involved in a housing struggle here, or a desegregation fight in the school there, came out of the woodwork to get their neighbors out to vote. Best of all, young people knocked on doors, talked to strangers, passed out flyers, and defended their positions in the streets for the first time. Dozens of young activists emerged in one of the most encouraging developments in the campaign. A few Finnegan supporters shifted their allegiance to King. Most Finnegan and DiCara supporters, however, began as we had expected to work for Flynn. Both Cuban-owned Spanish weeklies also shifted their support to Flynn. These forces supported Flynn not because they agreed with him but because there was not a more conservative candidate to support in the finals.

The core of the Flynn campaign among Latinos was based on liberal activists organized before the primary, but the rest of the effort consisted of conservative Cubans, evangelical Christians and Catholic activists who supported Flynn’s anti-abortion position, and Hispanic policemen. The Flynn machine among Latinos for the final election was based on the liberal core put together by Carmen Pola before the primaries, but its muscle was the most conservative elements of our community. This is true despite the progressive credentials of some of the leadership and the populist image Flynn projected.

Even more telling than the composition of the rival campaign coalitions are the issues which were used to pursue the Latino vote. For if the campaign had the outward appearance of a “clean fight,” a debate on the nuances differentiating two similar platforms, the reality of the street was different and dirtier. The main issue debated in the Latino community during the final weeks of the campaign was Mel King’s statement in a radio interview early in the campaign that Fidel Castro had done more for poor people in his country than Ronald Reagan in his, and that he preferred Castro to Reagan. This was given publicity on the front page of El Mundo and was much promoted in the street. “The red-baiting cost us votes,” according to one observer in Latinos for Mel King, though “it also got votes from people in our community who don’t like Reagan at all.” Although we did not want this to be a major issue in the campaign, the media and the Flynn campaigners made it one. One Flynn supporter, for example, moved his operations from Mission Hill to the South End, where he knocked on doors telling people King was “a black communist friendly with Fidel Castro.” Again, although we tried to steer the debate to other important issues, we knew that the opposition was going to try to turn it into a referendum between Fidel Castro and Ronald Reagan. To some extent, they succeeded in their objective: there was an enormous amount of discussion about the subject in bars, schools, shops, streets. Again, thanks to the opposition, a lot of consciousness was raised in Boston’s Latino community on Reagan and today’s Cuba.

The issue of the right to abortion was also much debated, and Mel’s pro-choice position in this matter was distorted and used to secure support from the more conservative fundamentalist groups, who flexed their political muscle for the first time.

There was also considerable use of issues which can only be classified as garbage: Mel was once a prisoner (he was once arrested in a housing demonstration along with many Puerto Ricans); his slogan “Boston Jobs for Boston
People’ meant that Latin people’s welfare checks would get taken away, and they would be forced to work under minimum wage; Mel was paying people to vote twice (this was coordinated with TV images of Boston police knocking on doors in public housing projects looking for fraudulently registered voters); if he won, the “piece of the pie” going to minorities would be all taken by blacks, and Latinos would have nothing. There was outright racism directed against blacks in parts of the Latino community. There were of course also statements about his personal life, his alleged lack of a smile, and his bald head; these were issues in the campaign at large, manipulated by the media, but in the Latino community they carried particular virulence. And it is necessary to add that the Flynn campaign cannot escape part of the responsibility. In a radio spot run the day before the election, Latinos for Mel King urged people not to pay attention to “what you hear in the street,” but vote for “what you want,” for their interests. The Flynn campaign countered with a spot on the same station saying that “what you hear in the street—it’s true.”

Tactically, one of the major tasks of the Flynn effort in the Latino community was to try to weaken solidarity between the black and Latino communities as manifested in this election campaign. It was only natural to expect that all “minorities” would coalesce behind a “minority” candidate, but those of us who know our communities know the bonds of solidarity to be complex and tangled. They often depend on ideological and political links which can be either resilient and powerful or merely tenuous depending on the circumstances. Besides the tactics already mentioned a number of very revealing and illustrative efforts were designed to attract Latino votes to Flynn. Politically, a large part of the effort consisted in pressuring the Felix Arroyo campaign to stay neutral or to lean toward Flynn; given the centrality of the Arroyo campaign to Latino electoral politics in Boston, it was an important effort. Felix was lobbied and pressured from inside and from outside the campaign, which included the pressure of prominent politicians. When the primaries selected King and Flynn as finalists, Felix congratulated both candidates, but only his picture with Flynn appeared in El Mundo. This was of course followed by gossip that Felix was about to endorse Flynn, which in turn yielded the desired results of increasing tension and suspicion between the two campaigns and the two communities and the two communities. Another piece of “information” was launched in the street: people could not vote for both Mel and Felix, and were going to have to choose. Even after Arroyo courageously endorsed King, rumors had to be countered daily about Felix changing his mind. Because he lost, while two black candidates won, the latino community felt let down by its black allies, a situation which also benefits only those who would weaken the needed solidarity.

The Latino Vote

Ideologically, several arguments were advanced against Mel King. Those pertaining to his radicalism we have already touched upon. Other arguments were aimed directly at the heart of the black-Latino alliance. The Latin community, it was said, would never be able to build a truly independent political force as long as we made an alliance with blacks a matter of principle, since blacks would then take us for granted and whites would have no reason to yield anything to us. The answer, instead, was to lie in building “our own house” equidistant from blacks and whites, which would allow us to play the time-enthroned game of “getting your piece of the pie.” This was supposed to prepare the community, as a bourgeois
academic would say, to become politically socialized to the culture of "American pluralist democracy."

There is much in the electioneering discourse to reinforce this position, and its implications are potentially very reactionary. Latino people, it follows from this line, will benefit more if we define ourselves not as a people of color, or as oppressed nationalities, or as minorities, or as members of a class, but as another ethnic group learning the rules of the competitive socio-political game of power in the United States. We can then market our voting power to those blocs which make interesting bids, whether these be conservative Reaganites or more liberal whites seeking some minority support to add a little color to the effort. In the decentralized structure of US politics and economics, this is supposed to produce a path to power. Besides negating the reality of class structure in this society, this argument preys on some of the baser qualities of people, and is prone to be used in a racist fashion. (Mel's counterpoint to this argument was, by the way, that we were not only seeking to change the players in the game, but to change the rules of the game, to make the city equitable, accessible, and just.) While in this campaign this general argument was not articulated with much ideological coherence or presented with sophistication, it was nevertheless an undercurrent of many arguments which went beyond dirt and fear, few as they were. This argument was actually presented in these terms—the "house" analogy—by a high school student who was supporting Flynn, but others used the same concepts and logic. Variations on this theme are being elaborated by a wide range of forces, from Reaganites to liberals.

The really innovative and insidiously dangerous ideological argument put forth by some pro-Flynn forces is this: that the one-third of the Latino community which ended up voting against Mel was somehow more "class conscious" than the majority. But the Flynn campaign did not use this argument to fight for votes in the Latino community; this argument was manipulated only among progressive activists. In canvassing thousands of Latino voters, not one person told us he or she would vote for Flynn because a vote for him would be a "class" vote. Only in an occasional public statement directed at Latinos would it be said that "Flynn has always been with the poor." In personal contact our constituency was wooed with negativity.

Second, this type of argument has the effect of presenting a class position as contradicting the democratic struggle of blacks and Latinos, instead of seeing them as part of a single quest for justice and freedom. It's enough to give class analysis a bad name in Third World communities within the US. Mel always presented "economic justice" as complementing, rather than opposing, the fight for racial justice, although we believe we did not project this position strongly enough. We agree that Flynn's populist discourse for dignity and justice and his criticism of "the rich" raised some working-class consciousness in some white sectors of the Boston population, but among Latinos the vote for Flynn was the opposite of class-conscious. It was a vote based on opposition to the right to abortion, on fear of the media image of Fidel Castro, on denying the connection between local, national and international realities, on confusion and disinformation. At best it was a vote for a strategy to empower Latinos which is founded on the premise that we must distance ourselves from blacks in order to advance.

As a matter of fact, one of the most gratifying aspects of the campaign in the Latino community was the wonderfully high degree of consciousness shown by Latino voters in the 1983 mayoral election, whether we evaluate that consciousness using class, race, sex, peace, or other criteria. In the end, the Latino vote went about 66 percent for Mel King and 33 percent for Ray Flynn. In other words, two-thirds of our community voted against the daily Boston newspapers and both weekly Spanish-language papers. They voted with relative clarity despite a well organized campaign of confusion. Why did they vote? Some voted because Mel is black. Others voted because he has been around when we were involved in struggle. Others because he has been around our community, period. Others did not like some positions, but recognized Mel's leadership qualities. Some voted for peace, others for the many other issues raised in the platform. They voted for a black candidate
they were repeatedly told was “buddies” with Fidel. They voted for the Rainbow despite the fact that they knew, toward the end, that we were not going to “win” this one. We witnessed the beautiful sight of dozens of new activists emerging to defend their community, to work and to fight. All of them defied a well organized effort to confuse them. In Boston in 1984, that is a conscious vote. Latinos for Mel King would be proud to take credit for that vote, but we know the limits of our efforts and the power of interests opposed, not just in the Flynn campaign. Instead, we have a better reward: our community demonstrated some ideological mettle. On that count alone, we have much reason to be optimistic. To the extent that we contributed to it, this amply justifies participation in the elections.

We learned again of the need to develop political education that is effective, that allows people to resist trash, that allows people to make connections between things which are in fact connected, that lets people know they can fight to be free. The combined power of the mass media and dirty street politics proved to be formidable as an opponent. A conscious and educated citizenry can confront lies and disinformation with dignity; the difficulty is help-
ing to develop this consciousness. We can say that the campaign was part of this process, and that it did educate and inform our community.

What's at Stake

The events of the campaign added fire to what many of us already knew: there is a serious, complex, and bitter struggle for the definition of Latino communities in the United States. From this struggle, still fluid and relatively undefined, a number of tentative political projects are beginning to emerge. At stake is the destiny and historic mission of more than 20 million Latin Americans living in the United States. The outcome will also influence the question of war and peace in the Central American/Caribbean region in the near future, and the relations between North and South for a more distant future.

Internationally, one of the developments which characterizes the world situation today is the crisis in Central America and the Caribbean, and the course which the United States government seems hell-bent on taking in response to that crisis. Should the US decide to invade in Central America, Latinos in the US will be treated like pawns of crucial importance. Nicaraguan mercenaries in the Everglades, Cuban terrorists from Florida running guns, Puerto Rican National Guard officers training Salvadoran Army recruits, Chicano/Mexican soldiers in the US Army operating in Honduras—these are some examples of the military roles currently being defined. There are also plans to use some Latinos as some have already been used in the past: in propaganda, intelligence, and other capacities, particularly in the denigrating task of lending legitimacy to the attack on our brothers and sisters in Latin America.

The other side of the coin, of course, is that Latin Americans in the US are not the docile and servile crowd imagined by some politicians, nor are their self appointed “Hispanic spokesmen” capable of leading the community, against their interest, in trying circumstances. Should the US risk a war in the region it will create a situation parallel to attempting the war on Vietnam with 20 million Vietnamese in this soil. It could be difficult. That in turn makes the memories of Manzanar and other concentration camps for the Japanese during World War II a vivid possibility. The stakes are high, in concrete terms.

If focused from an internal perspective, the situation of US Latinos is likewise at a crossroads. The Reagan administration is trying to redefine the way the US perceives the problems of racism and inequality, and to restructure the way the US addresses the demands of blacks, Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans, in order to roll back the democratic reforms of the last twenty years. There is among these groups an upsurge of consciousness, a blooming of clarity on the need to unite and struggle. There is a growth of class consciousness among workers. Unity then becomes crucial to this democratic movement, as it is crucial for the Right to prevent it. While we can expect the efforts to foment division to proliferate, we should remember that this too will be easier said than done. Our peoples share too much reality.

At this juncture we must remember that variations of the question “Are we Latin American, North Americans, or neither, or both, and if so what does this mean?” have been discussed in all sectors of our communities for as long as there have been some of us here, which is a long time. A corollary: What is and should be our relation to blacks, and others? The national question is always alive, always being asked and always being answered. But at this particular period in history this definition is not only difficult but particularly elusive. If we remember that there are objectively enormous class contradictions among Latinos but that these only partially manifest themselves subjectively, we must conclude that the politics of the Latino community for the coming period is by no means cast in stone. We are new, relatively inexperienced and cautious with the North American variant of electoral politics. Leadership, political consciousness, organizational forms, alliances within and outside the community are all in a moment of change.

The conjuncture demands definition, both internally and externally, but US Latinos are at the same time in a period of flux. This gap is the reason for the proliferation of leadership bids as well as projects designed brazenly to manipulate our community. It is as if a new market for
political opportunism has been announced and we are being flooded with con artists. We cannot be blamed for feeling like a desert-crosser keenly aware of the coyotes on the hills and vultures circling overhead.

Some of the coyotes have been around for a long time, but they are wearing a flashy new dress and engaging in a new style of work. The rise of the Right in the US has given new credibility to the extreme-right sectors of our communities and, though there has been no change in their political program, their tactics have changed. Those supporting the paramilitary training in the Florida Everglades and the mercenaries in Honduras are today engaged in lobbying in Washington, in presidential electioneering, and in becoming “Reagan’s Latinos.” Their interests and strategy coincide with those of the Reagan administration which in turn needs support internally not only for his policies toward Latin America but also among minorities in order to counter black voting strength. This strategy finds echo primarily among cubans, like Miami mayoral candidate Xavier Suarez, and with a few wealthy Chicano Republicans, though the coincidence of interests with this latter group is on somewhat different grounds. Among Puerto Ricans, this strategy finds almost no support. In the Boston election, this current is represented by the right-wing Cubans clustered around El Mundo newspaper, which supported Finnegan in the primary and Flynn in the final election.

Another emerging strategy is the one that posits support for an imperialist foreign policy in exchange for a series of reforms at home. Domestically, they call for democratic treatment of minorities and seek to make friends with the more traditional black leadership. Nationally, figures representative of this trend include mayors Maurice Ferre of Miami and Henry Cisneros of San Antonio. This trend is represented in Boston by part of the Cuban community and by some Puerto Ricans in the old Kevin White machine. In the media, La Semana newspaper is an example. Like the right wingers, they sided with Finnegan in the primaries and with Flynn in the final, but locally as well as nationally there are contradictions between these two groups.
Another trend includes the majority of the Puerto Rican community, the bulk of the Dominican community, and a few Cubans in the city of Boston. In domestic policy this trend tends to defend civil rights and other democratic reforms and to seek solidarity with the black community. The majority of the established Latino leadership of the city and the administrators of social service agencies comes from this group, but most working-class Latinos can also be said to follow this political direction. Not anti-imperialist, it is however a group conscious and proud of its Latin American heritage, and it seeks peace and negotiations over confrontation, although it tends to be primarily concerned with the local and "domestic" issues. The election demonstrated that people grouped in this trend are remarkably open to considering radical political alternatives, perhaps because of the failures of the traditional reformist schemes and because of the current administration openly seeks to worsen their position in society. Nationally, figures representative of this trend range from the Congressional Hispanic Caucus to Denver's Mayor Pena, from liberal and left Democrats to independent activists. In Boston they include figures like Jorge Hernández, Dukakis Latinos, and Felix Arroyo on the more progressive edge. They tended to side with the Rainbow.

The left in the community can itself be said to include various tendencies. The core of Latinos for Mel King included a number of left and progressive activists in the community from the beginning, but part of the Puerto Rican Left actively boycotted the elections at the beginning. The Boston Puerto Rican Collective, for example, consisting of left and progressive Puerto Ricans, could not decide on an electoral strategy. They organized a forum to which they invited people active in the various campaigns to discuss the elections. Only after the primaries, when they discovered that the majority of the Latino community was in fact engaged in the process, was debating important topics, and was leaving the left behind, did they endorse the Rainbow and work on the campaign. They played an important positive role in the final election. Nationally, we are pleased and encouraged to notice a rejuvenation and growth of progressive Latino politics in various manifestations. The recent Boston experience is an indication that the decline of the Puerto Rican Left has begun to be reversed.

The Flynn Latino campaign is perhaps indicative of another trend. It appears to have a genuine populist component in that some of its adherents have a history of militant struggle for reform, although it includes some who do not share this history. But it combines this populism with red-baiting and an effort to undermine, or at least redefine, the basis of black-Latino political relations. It seeks to impose a peculiarly North American deviation of "class-consciousness" which attempts to contrapose economic struggle to the struggle for the rights of oppressed people. At the time of the elections, the Flynn Latino coalition was a group glued together by opposition to Mel and the Rainbow more than by any common program. Now that it is in power, this trend may begin to take shape and consolidate. An effort will probably be made to give coherence to this direction, and we may then recognize another emerging trend in the community, with local and national implications. The participation of certain Cuban groups in this tendency can be considered an effort to inject anti-socialist sentiment into a Left which is overcoming it. If the experience of the campaign is any indication, we can expect this trend to be fraught with contradictions, and confusing to people.

The clarity of Mel's campaign helped to make these various trends visible in Boston. Mel, for example, recognized that an important cause of urban decay is the arms race, that peace is an issue in Boston. On the day of the invasion of Grenada, late in the campaign, Mel attended a rally to denounce it. The campaign set precedents in unity which are now part of our collective experience. And the unity of the oppressed was the campaign's banner, the Rainbow its symbol.

After this effort we can see clearly that there are two crucial stances by which the political projects directed at Latinos will have to be measured for the current period: 1) That Latin Americans in the US are by and large an oppressed minority made up mostly of working people, and that our unity with the black community is of strategic importance, and 2) that there is an inescapable connection between US-
Latin American relations on the one hand and our condition here on the other, with a posture calling for peace and negotiation being the one which defends our interest. If we judge our efforts by these criteria, we believe we advanced the struggle of working people and of Latinos in Boston. The Flynn campaign, for all its genuine populist appeal, was on the wrong side of both of these fences.

It may be argued that one election in one corner of the country does not permit sweeping generalizations. This has some validity. But this election, rather than being a chance event, was part of a process of movement building across the country (see for example the article by James Jennings in this issue). The peculiarities of this election, such as the populist perspectives of both candidates, the remarkable leadership qualities of Mel King, the debate of international issues in the local elections, can be treated as prisms through which we can analyze forces now emerging on the larger political arena. Furthermore, if we proceed with caution we can offer our reflections as just that: reflections. It remains our collective homework to enrich or refute them.

FOOTNOTES
1. Camayd-Freixas, Yohel, and Lopez, Russell Paul, 
   2. Ibid.

Melania Bruno and Mauricio Gaston were co-coordinators of Latinos for Mel King. Melania Bruno is Vice Chair of the Rainbow Coalition, a community activist and a psychologist who works with a project for Puerto Rican youth. Mauricio Gaston is active in the Cuban solidarity movement and in the local Latin community.
GRASS ROOTS POLITICS
AND BOSTON’S ASIAN COMMUNITY

A raw mid-November wind whipped the sidewalks lining Don Bosco High School, polling place for ward 3, precinct 8, the center of Boston’s Chinatown area. It whipped through the color guard of political signs and through the phalanxes of pollworkers. A dozen or so people were outside each of the two stairways leading to the high school doors, giving cards and repeating the names of their candidates to voters as they walked up.

Many of the workers at the city’s three Chinese precincts were part of the Asians for Mel King Committee. Kam Lee, an immigrant and part-time staff worker for the Chinatown Land and Housing Development Task Force, stood outside in the cold from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., passing out poll cards and talking to fellow tenants. Suzanne Lee, co-chair of the Chinatown People’s Progressive Association (CPPA), and Regina Lee, legal services lawyer, spent the day knocking on doors. Thomas Chan, school teacher, and Julian Lo, musician, got up at 6 a.m. to put up signs outside the polls, and spent the rest of the day pollwatching and checking off names of voters, while Che Ying Choi, a daycare worker, helped to drive people to the polls and deliver food to the poll workers. Six months of struggle came to nearly forty people of the Asian community, many taking the day off, coordinating diverse roles in a piercing, discouraging weather.
Political Power

What possessed us to do this? Members of the Asians for Mel King Committee had joined for various reasons, but two motivations were critical. Asians had never had any political power in this city. And now a black was running for mayor. As against the racism of the traditional Chinese leadership, we argued for unity with blacks and other minorities as our path together toward political power. The campaign would be a means to raise the issue of political power in our communities. The campaign was also an important struggle over whether a system of inequality in political representation would continue to exist in the city. This system has denied minorities any real political power. No Asian had ever held an elected office. Even the smallest political reforms that allowed minorities a possibility for power were perverted. For instance, the effect of the massive district representation campaign for Asians was that Chinatown was engulfed by South Boston in the same district (the district which would later elect Jim Kelly, famous race baiter, as its City Council representative). This lack of political power supported the overall inequality we faced in the city. It was this unjust and unequal system that we wanted to overturn. It was these rights to political representation and power that we wanted to insist upon. Mel had promised representation at City Hall for all parts of the population and local neighborhood councils. Mel's program meant for the first time political representation and a political voice.

Secondly, the platform of the campaign was consistently progressive. Mel presented a program of real change, a program that would address the major issues in the city and in our community. We supported the overall campaign platform, and there were particular issues for our community. Housing has been the most visible issue in the community for the last decade. The community has been put under siege by the rapid expansion of Tufts-New England Medical Center (T-NEMC). While the Asian population had grown 50 percent in the 1970-1980 decade, the housing stock had actually decreased. In 1983, when fifteen units of new housing were offered, 1,500 people waited out-
side for applications. Mel had marched in our housing demonstrations in the past and Mel's program meant an elected neighborhood council which would have control over city services and could stop T-NEMC. Jobs were another growing problem. Garment factories were shutting down from the pressure of rents driven up by T-NEMC and runaway shops. The Chinese restaurant industry was saturated. Waiters line up in Chinatown every day for cars to take them to work, sometimes as far as the outer reaches of Maine. Boston Jobs for Boston People would allow the community the opportunity to break into new industries, an opportunity forcefully denied to us in the past. Other issues of concern are education, social services, equality of language and culture, China, and anti-Asian violence. It meant support for our culture and our language, our ESL programs, the health center, the community school program. It meant an end to the divisive two-China policy, equal recognition of the People's Republic and Taiwan, which the Chinatown political hacks had developed under incumbent Mayor White. It meant someone who would speak against the new tide of physical attacks against Asians. During the last few years, Asians had been attacked and even murdered in areas of the city as diverse as Dorchester, Brighton, and Kenmore Square. The most recent was the murder of Anh Mai in July in Dorchester. Though we knew that much of these reforms could only be partially achieved even if Mel were elected, the welfare of people would be better than if the atmosphere of takebacks and givebacks continued.

Class Struggle in the Chinese Community

The struggle was exciting with many lessons and opportunities to build the movement. We felt all along that win or lose, the mass movement had a lot to gain from the King campaign. After Mel announced that he was running in April, we decided to form a committee to support Mel King. The committee became quite broad and included activists, social service workers and directors, government functionaries, restaurant and garment workers, suburban and Chinatown residents, students, an electrician, and a newspaperman. We shared a confidence that we were working together for a better community and city. We were based mainly in the Chinatown community, but also involved other Asians and tried to reach other Asian populations, such as Japanese Americans and Chinese in Brighton. We looked for our support among the workers and lower petty bourgeoisie in Chinatown, as we were. We wanted to involve people in the political process and build a grassroots movement for representation and political power.

However, we knew that we faced some enormous obstacles in the community. For years access to City Hall had been monopolized by a small clique. This group was headed by the Chin brothers, Frank and Billy. Billy owned the largest restaurant in Chinatown and used it to hold fundraisers for many politicians. Frank was a purchasing agent for the White Administration. While their high positions were never used to effectively stop T-NEMC, for years the Chin brothers had delivered overwhelming margins for White or against White's enemies. They have fiercely resisted any democratic process or mass input into any major decisions in the community, anything that would threaten their control over it. When a significant part of the community decides to support an independent candidate, as Asians for Mel King did, we were shaking one of their pillars of power, and they would fight us tooth and nail. These people represented the right wing of the upper petty bourgeoisie in Chinatown. They are the so-called traditional leaders: The Chinese Benevolent Association, the Guomintang (the political party of Taiwan), and some of the major restaurant and business owners. Although at times they will join the struggle against national oppression, because of their relatively privileged class position their formula for obtaining political power is to go with the white traditional forces and hope that Chinese will obtain some benefits. There were two telling indications of that class nature. The slate of candidates they endorsed along with Flynn (who does not acknowledge the existence of any discrimination against minorities), included Jim Kelly and Albert "Dapper" O'Neill for City Council, openly white rights candidates, who have taken numerous stands against minority people and who have done.
their utmost to foster racism and division in the city. Second, they conducted the Chinatown electoral work without putting out a single piece of Chinese-language literature with the content of Flynn’s platform. They had other ways of getting votes.

For the majority of people in the Chinese community who are working people, we know that gaining power means fighting for it and not waiting for the favors of the traditional white racist political system. Political power means power for the majority, the disenfranchised, blacks, Asians, and working people, those of us who have traditionally been locked out of the democratic process. This was part of the impetus for supporting the King campaign and building support at the grass roots community level. Thus the campaign for Mel became part of the class struggle in Chinatown. When the Chin brothers lined up with Flynn the lines were drawn between the progressive and backward forces in the community.

This was the first time that Boston Chinatown had seen a real grass-roots electoral campaign. Our first step was to familiarize the people of the community with Mel. To this end, we registered hundreds of people to vote. We translated and distributed Mel’s literature and his stands on the issues. He made three tours of Chinatown before the primary. We timed his visits so that he would meet the workers, the garment workers getting out of work and the
restaurant workers who lined up to catch rides to their workplaces all over New England. We also visited each store in the community. Mel came to the August Moon Festival. He spoke at the community’s candidates forum and various dinners. Our message was that voting for Mel King was part of fighting for Asian people’s rights, part of our struggle for political rights, for community control. We also met with Mel and helped him to develop his understanding of the Asian community. For the first community people, from workers to storekeepers to professionals, discussed issues — crime, housing, jobs, political representation, community control and electoral politics itself in relation to a local election.

We were able to build a lot of support. Most of our support came from workers or younger Asians. While some supported Mel because of his program and some because of their identification of their fate with other minorities, a lot of people supported the campaign because of our years of work in the community. They knew that if we supported Mel, it must be in the best interests of the community. And others supported Mel simply because they opposed the Chins. We had a cocktail fundraiser and raised $1,500. We spoke to community activists and built up a network of supporters around the Asians for Mel King Committee. To consolidate our work we canvassed door-to-door in the housing developments and did phone polling to identify the King supporters.

Then just before the primary the Chins came out for Flynn. We heard that the Chins promised Flynn 90 percent of the vote in Chinatown. In addition to the garment workers’ union, ILGWU, came out for Flynn. They put a lot of pressure on the workers. The union business agents were the workers’ lines to their benefits, pensions, and steady work. With their limited English, the garment workers risked much if they opposed the union.

When primary day came we mobilized our people to do the checking, poll watching, running, and phoning that was necessary. Then we saw how the Chins planned to deliver their votes. Our work became one long day of fighting underhanded political activity and vote manipulation. The Chin brothers used their relationship with City Hall to put their people in positions as “translators.” They “translators” would go into the polling booth with Chinese, especially elderly, and pull lever for them. When we caught them and had them “translator” thrown out, an inspector from the elections department showed up. Who was he? A part of the Chins’ machine. We had to spend our time inspecting the inspector. And of course the union reps were out there watching the workers.

Mel did very well in the primary. In the three Chinatown precincts — 3/7, 3/8, and 5/1 — Mel defeated Flynn by 100 votes, though we lost 3/8, where the Chins had the most influence. This gave us a great impetus to work even harder for the final. The highlight of the campaign in the community was the Asian Walk for Mel King. We walked through the community chanting in both English and Chinese, handing out literature. We held up signs and sold Mel King balloons and buttons at the major intersection in Chinatown all day. We registered voters. We drove sound truck around the community and leafleted. We bought ads in the Chinatown newspapers. And near election day we had a citywide fundraising dinner in Chinatown. Of course we continued the literature drops, the phoning, and the door knocking. People were encouraging and supportive.

At the same time, it had become clear to the Chins and the ILGWU that for the first time they had a real fight on their hands. This time the Chins couldn’t effortlessly “deliver” the Chinese vote. They had to work overtime. Using their positions in the community and as major employers, they forced shops to put signs in their windows; a waiter told us that Billy Chin told all his workers that they had to vote for Ray Flynn. People who voted for Mel in Chinatown got calls. Bosses talked to husbands of garment workers who had voted for Mel. Since these people controlled workers’ jobs and owned the buildings workers lived in, they tried to intimidate the workers. Within the factories, the ILGWU also tried to use racism to win votes. A union rep with Flynn admonished people not to vote for the “black devil.” Other Flynn workers warned that black street crime would be out of control with a black mayor.

The mayoral elections had the potential to
rally and organize the Chinese people to fight for our rights, to build our understanding of our relationship to the struggle of other oppressed peoples. But the Right was trying to fan racist sentiments and divide Chinese people from potential allies. We knew we had to take them on, and we went on a campaign to stop them. We did this one-on-one in our daily contact with community people. We called the ILGWU president. We also raised it sharply and publicly to Ray Flynn at a citywide women’s forum so that his campaign would realize that this kind of activity would not go unexposed. And we responded in the Chinese press. We believe that we made it much harder for them to openly use racism in the Chinatown campaign.

However, much harm was done. Some people were intimidated. Others were susceptible to the fears and stereotypes in US society that the Flynn people played on. The furious campaign schedule made it difficult to work with people in a patient and in-depth manner. While many remained firm, others were warned away by the attacks of the Right.

During the campaign we also contributed to a lot of citywide work and developed ties with other communities across the city. The “rainbow coalition” which we established allowed our community to work with more groups and sectors of people and on the broadest basis ever. We worked with people around day care, women’s issues, decentralization proposals, and bilingualism, as well as electioneering. We also spoke at rallies and events across the city to various audiences, educating people about Chinatown and Asians.

Election Day

As the final election approached we felt that we had done the best we could have. We had
done a lot of mass outreach and felt that we had built a solid base of support for Mel. We tried to prepare for the Chins. We doubled the number of volunteers in our area. We had extra lawyers brought in and placed at the polls. However the Chins had responded in kind. They had increased their workers. The ILGWU was outside in force. Moreover the Chins had increased the number of "translators" and placed people in the elderly housing to pull people to the polls. The best we could do was to try to stem the tide. Even when we had lawyers placed at the polls, they didn't speak Chinese and a lot of votes were lost. Our bilingual people were busy phone-calling and getting people to the polls. When we could put some people inside we were able to get one "translator" removed from 5/1. But it wasn't enough.

The Conclusion

We didn't win the mayoralty. We lost by a 2 to 1 margin. In the Chinatown precincts Mel and Flynn ran head to head. We lost 3/8 again and won 3/7 and 5/1 by smaller margins. But the sense of the whole campaign has been that, win or lose, we were fighting for more than one political office. The measure of our victory will be seen in the coming months and years, but we unquestionably gained ground in the struggle for equality and progress. This was shown in the election-night Mel King campaign party, where 4,000 people of all nationalities packed into the Sheraton Hotel ballroom to celebrate what we had won. In fact, from watching the election coverage of the two candidates' "victory" parties, several Chinese immigrants told us that they thought Mel had won. We did win in some very important ways. We changed Boston.

For many of us it has been a struggle to keep the elections work in perspective. Fundamentally we felt that the mass movement had to come out of it stronger and better equipped to carry on its struggles. There was a strong tendency to put everything into the campaign and let the ongoing work where we came from — tenants work, mass organizations such as CPPA, women's groups such as ASIA, student groups — flounder. However we had struggled to keep that work going and to build those organiza-

ions through the work. For example, in CPPA we saw the election as a means to have people better understand what the organization stood for. We put out our own position on why we supported Mel King.

The campaign also had changed the political situation for the Asian communities. Previously considered "invisible," Asians definitely became a recognized political force in the city. Asians had established themselves as a component part of any future coalition politics in the city, a step toward political power. In Chinatown, we also developed a valuable "coalition" of various people interested in greater democracy. This united front of people from different backgrounds was able to strike a blow at the control of the right-wing forces. We were able to give expression to the desire of Chinese people for democracy and equality, as an alternative to the right wing's dirty politics and manipulation and patronage. And in the process, we and others in the community deepened our understanding of the role that different classes play in the community, and about the limits of the democracy we have now. We've introduced wider discussion and struggle over important issues, such as multi-national unity, community control, and electoral politics. We've built greater unity and understanding across the city through our participation, causing people to sit up and take notice.

Mike Liu is a long-time community activist and a member of the steering committee of the Chinatown People's Progressive Association. He is a contributor to East Wind magazine.
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LAVENDER IS A COLOR IN THE RAINBOW:
Lesbians and Gays and Boston Politics

Margaret Cerullo, Marla Erlien
Kate Raisz and Jessica Shubow

On the night Mel King was scheduled to appear at the Marquee, one of the Boston area's two lesbian bars, a marked excitement rippled throughout the dimly-lit room. In a new twist on the classic electoral campaign style, five or six campaign aides were working the bar crowd, handing out literature, selling buttons, telling everyone Mel was on the way. Our buttons read "Gay and Straight Together (with a rainbow emblazoned across), Mel King for Mayor" and the campaigners were all open members of the Boston area lesbian community. Outside on Massachusetts Avenue, the election commission had allowed for a table to register voters. No one remembered having been given recognition such as this during any previous election campaign.

Mel's towering figure moved with ease and familiarity through the crowd of lesbians. He took the microphone and proceeded to speak not about what he had done of value but what the lesbian community had done. "Some people have said I am the greatest friend the lesbian community has ever had. But, that's not right--the lesbian community is the greatest friend the lesbian community has ever had." He compared us with the woman he called his role model, Rosa Parks, and said that when people in a community stand up and say "I am somebody" then room is made for them and for others to be fully who they are. The crowd
cheered. Mel stood and danced with us frequently in the lesbian and gay bars that were, until the gay liberation movement, the only sanctioned gathering places for the lesbian and gay community in a homophobic society seeking to degrade and ghettoize us. "There's a little gay in all of us," Mel said in his speech at a gay and lesbian cultural event for his campaign. Politics in the Boston area was definitely changing.

The recent success of the struggle for district representation in Boston (a struggle led by Mel King) meant the creation of a largely gay district which opened the way for an openly gay candidate, radical tenant activist David Scondras, to run for city council. And, Mel King's presence in the mayoral campaign, given his past support for the politics, culture and social life of the community, meant several aspects of gay involvement in this campaign would be distinctive. Not only would the "gay vote" be targeted by the King campaign, but a visible gay and lesbian presence would be welcomed as part of that effort. Not only would gay rights be recognized, Mel would develop a program to address the homophobia and heterosexism that circumscribe gay people's lives in Boston, as elsewhere. And, finally, and perhaps most unusual in the emergence of gays in electoral politics, the distinct voice of lesbians within the gay community would be recognized.

While the King and Scondras campaigns were contexts in which gay and lesbian issues gained visibility and legitimacy,¹ the question of who defined and represented the gay community was answered by a bitter contest. Divisions emerged strongly when the Boston Lesbian and Gay Political Alliance (BLGPA), set up in 1982 to lobby and endorse public officials, announced their choice of Larry DiCara,² a pro-business, anti-union "liberal,"³ for mayor, and no endorsement in Scondras' district. BLGPA was known to many of us as having a narrow gay rights view whose goal was to broker for "influence" in city politics. When they quickly became identified by the media and various campaigns as the voice of Boston's gay population, and as such sought to publicize their endorsements, many gays and lesbians mobilized to challenge their authority. To some extent this was an old battle—between grassroots movement building and "power brokering" as the routes to gay power. It is a battle that in Boston had been consistently won by more radical and feminist elements within the gay community. But, as we were learning quickly, the ability of radicals to command lessened as competing gay politics entered public debate (as was true in the mayoral race, and the media and other establishment forums (by designating which voice is heard) become definers of gay politics.

This election campaign marked a critical point in the history of gay politics in this city. The struggle over the endorsements revealed and heightened other divisions within the community, divisions within gay male politics and between gay and lesbian politics. Before I proceed to describe the actual work and experience of the lesbian and gay committee and elaborate our assessment of the meaning of this campaign for the future, we must first turn the history of lesbian and gay politics in Boston. For, it is from that history that we understand how gays and lesbians mobilized the 1983 election.

Three features characterized lesbian and gay politics in Boston. First, a radical voice has been stronger and more defining of gay politics than most other cities with a substantial gay presence. Second, lesbians and feminist politics have played a significant role in setting the political agenda of the community; and, third, a focus on race and anti-racism have been key to the development of the lesbian/feminist community since the mid-seventies. The test for gay and lesbian politics came with the rise of the Right. After setting some of the context of the seventies, we will discuss the confrontation with the New Right, for we believe that it was in the confrontation that the current shape of gay politics in the city took place.

That gay men and lesbians have come together in an electoral campaign in which liberation politics was on the agenda is not surprising. Although work on gay rights legislation began in 1972, it was a radical critique of heterosexual culture that dominated Boston's gay and lesbian politics. Characteristic of this radicalism has been the development of community...
cultures that challenged both the straight world, including the straight left, and the traditional gay sub-cultures. The managers/owners of gay establishments and their Democratic Party allies have represented the conservative voice of Boston’s gay community. Yet their social and economic power was not enough to control the newly developing gay politics. When gay men and women initiated a change in the title of Gay Pride to Lesbian and Gay Pride, the bar managers opposed this and lost. When some of the men’s bars refused entry to queens, invoking dress codes, protests were organized by gay men who sought to expose the continuities between traditional gay male culture and heterosexual assumptions of masculinity.

While queens were central to the Stonewall rebellion of 1969, they remained a spectacle and entertainment for both heterosexuals and many gays, and an embarrassment to some gay rights activists who saw respectability and power as synonymous. But, in the 1970s a new generation of queens emerged to politicize that identity. Influenced by feminism, these gay men in ‘gender-fuck’ drag self-consciously opposed male power and moved to disrupt rigid notions of gender.

For the most part, lesbians and gay men have created separate contexts both in terms of community and politics since the early gay liberation days. For the men, the politics of “public sex” emerged in response to police harassment and arrests in known cruising areas. The sensationalized exposure in 1978 of a so-called boy-love “sex ring” just outside Boston rallied many gay men to the defense of those arrested. Fag Rag, a local left-oriented gay male magazine, raised all the thorny issues, challenging respectability as a goal for gay politics. While the arrests opened up a heated debate on the issue of boy-love, that issue became second to the need to counter state repression, especially since the arrests were understood as linked to anti-gay initiatives across the country. However intense the divisions, there was agreement that the debate would not be resolved by the state or by the right wing.

Politically active lesbians located themselves primarily in the women’s movement and its many organizing and service projects. While explicit lesbian issues were rarely on the agenda of these feminist activities, a lesbian identity was being shaped by cultural events, by making claims on public space, projecting clearly lesbian-identified images and by being affectionate on the street. The commitment to create a culture in which diversity was recognized and celebrated and racism opposed in all its manifestations became central to the definition of lesbian politics and community. The Combahee River Collective, a black feminist and lesbian group formed in the mid-seventies, as well as active Latin and Asian lesbians took the initiative in this redefinition of lesbian and feminist politics. The general mobilization by Third World gays and lesbians has sharpened for all of us an understanding of the connections between race, class, gender and sexuality. Third World lesbians have recently published an increasing quantity of essays and poetry addressing such questions. For it is as Black lesbians or Chicana lesbians that many now articulate their struggle to understand a politicized identity—one so infused with the realities of race, class, gender and sexuality in US society that to discreetly pursue each would distort the meaning of their place in the culture.
Rise of the Right

1978: Enter Anita Bryant. While Bryant was best known politically as the figurehead of Save Our Children, an anti-gay New Right organization, her scheduled appearance in Boston on September 1 was to support the “pro-family tradition” of Howard Phillips’ candidacy for the US Senate. (Phillips, the initiator of the Conservative Caucus, is considered one of four key leaders of the New Right.) Bryant’s visit to Boston came at a moment of heightened confrontation between the New Right and gays and lesbians. Dade County, Florida, her home base, had just overturned its gay rights ordinance; the Briggs Initiative had been introduced in California; and the orange juice boycott was in motion. Meanwhile, the forces which ultimately defeated Briggs were taking shape; and in Boston and elsewhere, Bryant’s public presence was greeted by active opposition. We believe that it was in this confrontation between lesbians/gays and the New Right that the outlines of current gay politics took shape.

The retreat from cultural politics in much of the feminist and left response to the New Right, ceding ground to the New Right’s pro-family politics, made lesbians and gays invisible in those areas. In consequence, leftist gay men and feminist lesbians were increasingly drawn into a gay context, involving themselves in defining the gay and lesbian opposition to the New Right. What became clear in the mobilization against Bryant by the September 1 Coalition was that lesbians felt stronger as feminists in the gay movement than as lesbians in the women’s movement. For example, the public defense of abortion, articulated by reproductive rights activists against the New Right’s attack, sidestepped a discussion of sexuality even though it was clear that female sexuality, women’s autonomy from men and women’s rebellion to proscribed roles were all at stake. Those who sought to raise sexuality as part of reproductive rights work were silenced, while feminist lesbians working in a gay context were successful in adding a pro-abortion statement to the politics put out by the September 1 Coalition, despite the resistance on the part of some gay men who expressed anti-abortion views.

The plans for a counter-rally and march against Anita Bryant’s presence in Boston high-
of neighborhoods against gentrification, BLAGMAR took on directly the “left” attack on gays as gentrifiers. Analyzing the repressive culture of traditional neighborhoods, the formation of urban gay ghettos in the gaps left by white flight, as well as the scapegoating of gays instead of the real estate interests at the root of gentrification, BLAGMAR challenged the anti-gay underpinnings of some left politics on housing issues, while at the same time exploring the meaning of class and race divisions among gays and lesbians.

We discuss this history in order to emphasize that, overwhelmingly, gay and lesbian politics did not bend to the growing conservative momentum in the culture. Gay Community News has become a kind of emblem of the alliances worked out in this period. A national gay and lesbian newspaper based in Boston, GCN has been the site of struggle, particularly between gay men and lesbians. The resolution of those tensions led to opening the paper to women’s issues in general, committing itself to representing the diversity of its constituency and maintaining a memory, if not a goal, of liberation politics over a simple gay rights plank. As a gay/lesbian paper, it is unique among the array of gay/lesbian papers across the US.

While the New Right saw anti-sexual and anti-gay views as their strong card in winning people to their cause, the gay and lesbian constituency, by their strength in grass roots mobilization, reversed the New Right’s momentum. Gays and lesbians became more aggressive while, for example, timidity plagued the reproductive rights struggle. The outcome for gays and lesbians was the recognition of their political power. Subsequently, mainstream politics would have to reckon with this constituency.

The Mayoral Race: An Embattled Gay/Lesbian Constituency
Mel King was distinctive among the field of candidates running for mayor in 1983. Mel already had a history of active support for gays and lesbians. As opposed to our gay representative in the legislature, Rep. Mel King immediately agreed to speak at the anti-Anita Bryant rally. When a gay man was murdered in a known cruising area, Mel joined our candle-light march through the park and spoke of the need to create alliances among those who suffer the bigotry, violence and injustice of American culture. And as a representative in the legislature, Mel cosponsored legislation to ensure fair housing and employment for gays and lesbians. Yet, Mel never advocated that change could be simply legislated. He challenged people’s way of seeing each other and called for strengthening social movements not back room negotiations as definers of those changes.

While the main features of lesbian and gay politics in Boston were gaining ground in the 80s (lesbians and gays as such became active in anti-militarist work; reproductive rights organizing became more open to a discussion of sexuality; and Third World lesbians and gays won their fight for a speaker, Audre Lorde, at the 20th anniversary of Martin Luther King’s March on Washington), no gay and/or lesbian political organization existed that represented the complexity of gay and lesbian activism. On the contrary, juxtaposed to these grass-roots developments came a new gay newspaper and an organization in 1982 which would represent an opposition to the radicalism that had characterized the gay/lesbian movements, a radicalism that ironically expanded space for gay businesses and neighborhoods. Those flourishing in this expanded space designed a strategy for integration into the city’s existing power structure in opposition to those who saw their political power originating in a social movement.

Posed as an alternative to the “stridency” of GCN, the new gay publication (named after the gentrified facades of Boston’s South End), Bay Windows, depicts the carefree social life of Boston’s gay citizens. Appealing to the expand-
ing gay population and corresponding growth of gay businesses in the South End, Bay Windows is a prime example of how the gay movement can be coopted into the commercial world: gay politics is sold back to people as a life style, cutting off the essential critique raised by gayness of our whole society.

The new gay organization, BLGPA, is an organization of approximately 200, whose membership is predominantly white gay men (being gay is not even required for membership). Launching a campaign in 1982 to influence the political agenda of city politicians around gay civil rights, its founders saw in the recent implementation of district representation a chance to gain clout, at least in the one district with a heavily, if economically comfortable, gay male population. They immediately drew the attention of the city’s big media. BLGPA implicitly indicated its break with the more radical, feminist and anti-racist politics that had given definition to the gay and lesbian voice in Boston. However, they erred in thinking that a new era was upon us that would sacrifice a social movement for personal power within city politics. Its endorsement of DiCara and failure to endorse Scoulas in the preliminary, communicated as the voice of the gay/lesbian community and widely publicized by all the media, left many gays and especially lesbians incredulous. BLGPA’s defense of its endorsements was telling. They appealed to their democratic procedures—one man, one vote—and to the openness of the organization to anyone who wanted to join (and pay dues of $10 a year). BLGPA’s notion of representing a community by majority vote in a tiny organization simply declaring itself “open” to everyone did not go unchallenged.

Failing to make racism or sexism or classism integral to their understanding of gay/lesbian issues ensured that those with social and economic power would feel most at home in the organization and define its politics. If the interests of all gays and lesbians coincide, then democratically representing such interests poses little problem. But that is not the case. The claim of a single issue gay focus easily obscures power relations. The meaning of being gay differs depending on your place in the culture as a whole, a point made most strongly by Third World lesbians and gays. What BLGPA underlined is that unless representation is understood in terms of the diversity of a community, then the community will be represented by the most powerful within it, i.e. economically comfortable white men.

Many in BLGPA didn’t understand the meaning of MLK in the electoral arena. They didn’t understand the significance of MLK speaking the language and history of the gay/lesbian movement. They didn’t understand that the strength of our movement depended upon creating alliances with other communities in the name of a shared vision. If anything, BLGPA mobilized an increasing number of people to become active in the King campaign.

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**Lesbian and Gay Committee for Mel King**

The lesbian and gay committee was started into motion when BLGPA announced its endorsements. In particular, the predominantly lesbian committee recognized the need to build closer connections to the gay male community where BLGPA had its base. For many lesbians working for the first time in a mixed gay context, this was a discouraging time. The gap in politics, particularly race politics, not to mention social and economic power, between the lesbian and gay male communities felt immense. For some, doubts they had about identifying with the gay committee instead of as lesbians in the women’s committee resurfaced. Yet, there was a perception that lesbian concerns would find a sharper voice in a mixed gay context than in a feminist one. A commitment to guarding against invisibility of lesbians and gay men and our issues kept lesbians active in the committee. While the committee was and remained predominantly white, it had ties and commitments to Third World lesbians and gay men (most of whom decided to work in their neighborhoods during the campaign). These commitments meant Mel King was the only choice for the lesbian and gay community, the only candidate who spoke for all of us. The Lesbian and Gay Committee for Mel King came together around the premise that the interests
of lesbians and gays and of all marginalized constituencies are linked. Bring the bottom up, Mel said, and we all rise. Our task then was to:
1. locate, identify and work to organize the lesbian and gay community in the city;
2. raise consciousness within the Rainbow about the experience of lesbians and gay men, and attempt to see that experience integrated fully into the platform;
3. challenge racism within the lesbian and gay community; and,
4. pull out the gay vote for Mel.

Getting Out the Vote

For many who work in electoral politics, an elaborate infrastructure is available of wards and precincts, voter registration lists, statistical polls, and constant media analysis of campaign efforts. But for organizers of the lesbian and gay constituency, no such infrastructure exists (at least, not yet). There may be a few neighborhoods with higher gay concentrations than others; yet, most lesbians and gay men live outside those neighborhoods. We are everywhere, and yet we are often invisible.

The lesbian and gay organizing committee pursued every known gay or lesbian group for its membership or mailing list. (Many organizations make it a policy not to give out their lists in respect of their members’ wish for privacy.) We built upon the lists we received by asking every lesbian or gay man we contacted for the names of five of her or his friends. Many gay men and lesbians are wary of how a stranger knows they are gay. It breaks the ice to mention their friend’s name and also to come out first. “I’m a lesbian working on the Mel King campaign” was a frequent telephone introduction. Through such networking efforts lesbians and gay men (and a few friends) paid for a full page of community endorsements for Mel in the gay press, dramatically outstripping the entire membership of BLGPA. A lesbian/gay mailing went out to 800 individuals.

Neighborhoods and the Gay Constituency

After the preliminary, the lesbian and gay committee received instructions regarding a campaign strategy change from a constituency orientation to a neighborhood focus. Such a shift was a major shakeup to our voter identification approach. Our “neighborhood” is where we are out, in organizations, in the bars, at events, and among friends. It is often in our geographical neighborhoods that we are most closeted. Though it was resolved in our committee not to dissolve our approach and fragment ourselves into neighborhoods, to operate solely on a constituency-focused model should not be seen exclusively as the ideal. That lesbians and gays are not fully ourselves in our neighborhoods is clearly an indication of the viciousness of homophobia. Education and consciousness-raising must combine with determined efforts by lesbians and gay men to claim equal status in their neighborhoods. This
work must become an integral part of our growing city-wide movement to make all neighborhoods fully accessible to all people.

Inside the Rainbow

For lesbians and gay men to be out and determined about lesbian and gay issues at all levels of the campaign was essential in making the coalition truly representative of the ten or more percent of Boston residents (the lesbian and gay community in a very conservative estimate) we sought to involve in the Rainbow. Human contact on a daily basis through campaign work made it possible for straight people to break out of their homophobia. One lesbian recounts the story of a Rainbow Celebration where the emcee leading various chants got the crowd shouting support for "gay and lesbian rights."

But homophobia did not disappear inside the Rainbow. One aspect was veiled in the obsession with winning every possible vote at a cost that might include pandering to homophobia or omitting lesbian/gays from those to be targeted in a given neighborhood. While there were gay and lesbian contingents and usually a lesbian or gay speaker at city-wide events, the committee did not succeed in ensuring gay speakers at most events in the neighborhoods. Offers to send out explicitly gay materials to different neighborhoods were commonly met with the response that "there aren't any gay people in this neighborhood."

The bars are among the few places where an identifiable lesbian and gay community is visible. And, as we hinted earlier, Boston's women's and a few men's bars were pivotal in our organizing efforts. In the bars, we distributed leaflets, set up literature tables, sold buttons, and held fundraisers that brought in thousands of dollars to support Mel's candidacy. And perhaps most important of all, in those bars, lesbians and gay men met Mel face to face, talked and danced with him. If the bars were not the most obvious site for political discussion, the visibility of campaign materials addressed exclusively to lesbians and gay men in the language of our own communities and movements instilled a sense of excitement and pride. A very small number were unresponsive; many were eager to hear about what set Mel apart from other politicians. Because we shared a certain trust, it was possible to explore issues of racism with several people: were our interests and those of the black community in sync? Would a straight black man really be there for us? Were lesbians and gays really in the Rainbow Coalition? The campaign button became a phenomenon itself. More people than we could produce them for wanted to wear the word GAY printed alongside "Mel King for Mayor." Others felt we had left lesbians invisible, so an edition of "Lesbian, Gay, and Straight Together" buttons appeared. Jessica Shubow recounts her experience: "For me, these buttons resulted in numerous opportunities for consciousness-raising. Once in a pizza parlor in Dorchester with predominantly Spanish speaking patrons, another time on the Red Line train, the response was first "All right! Mel King!", then a closer perplexed look, "Are you gay?" or an embarrassed turning away. While I engaged in dialogue many times, I was personally never the victim of open hostility while wearing the button. The respect and legitimacy gained by the Rainbow Coalition seemed to shield me."

The fact that the gay button produced uneasiness inside the Rainbow is important. Many wondered and a few asked "why do you have to proclaim who you sleep with?" For many lesbians and gay men, it often takes years before developing the pride to affirm their gayness. Interestingly, many did so for the first time while identifying as part of the Rainbow Coalition. In choosing the slogan "Gay and Straight Together" instead of, perhaps, "Lesbians and Gay Men Are Part of the Rainbow," or "...for Mel," we were seeking to reinforce the power and importance of solidarity. Months later, the buttons can still be seen around town.

Kate Raisz, a lesbian/gay committee coordinator, lives in Jamaica Plain, the Boston neighborhood with the largest lesbian population. In the closing weeks of the campaign, the lesbian/gay committee targeted priority districts. Kate recalls: "A number of ward and precinct coordinators in the areas we targeted were glad for our presence and our additional workers. But one neighborhood coordinator responded negatively, saying that some of his precincts were very conservative
and since there was no previously organized lesbian and gay presence, election day was not the time to come out. I challenged him saying that the area has the largest lesbian community in Boston. When he replied that it was not a visible community, I felt angry about the standards of visibility. I had always felt a strong lesbian presence as I walked down the main street in my neighborhood. Signs in my laundromat openly advertised numerous lesbian households and apartments. What’s necessary, I wondered for lesbians to be visible?

On election day close to a hundred poll workers were wearing labyrinths or pink triangles as they handed out cards or held signs for Mel King for mayor. These openly lesbian and gay poll workers made it clear that lavender was a vibrant and vital color in Mel King’s campaign rainbow. Every lesbian or gay worker whether visible or closeted passed these brothers and sisters on entering the polling place, one last reminder that Mel King represented the interests of our community. But one area coordinator urged that the visibility be avoided. His concern, again from Kate Raisz, “was with ‘respectability,’ and with as he put it not ‘alienating’ voters who were pro-Mel King but anti-gay. He feared openly lesbian and gay poll workers would backfire on the campaign, by turning away potential voters. We had to do what we could to keep every vote. It didn’t matter if some people who voted for Mel were anti-gay, he rationalized, as long as Mel himself, who advocated lesbian and gay rights, was elected. Although I too cared deeply about winning the election and about getting each and every vote we could, I could never accept a rationale which would silence lesbians and gay men in order to placate heterosexists.”

Invoking Mel’s personal example was effective against homophobia, as when a snicker followed mention of gay people in a staff meeting early in the campaign, or when returning a phone call to our committee from headquarters had been treated as too low a priority. We had to continually remind campaign workers that to pit lesbian and gay concerns against those of people of color was to deny the existence of lesbians and gay men of color, and to support the invisibility of lesbians and gays within their own communities.

On the eve of the massive Rainbow Celebration a week before the election, members of our committee joined a crowd of people sprawled out on the floor of the black community headquarters in Dorchester as we all worked feverishly on fifteen foot banners for neighborhoods, committees, and special constituencies. Expressions of shock or discomfort drifted regularly past our lavendar “Lesbians and gay men for Mel King”. Called over to the side by a local campaign worker, Jessica was asked courteously if she would explain first why she wanted to look and act like a man and secondly, “was not homosexuality akin to genocide?” The first question was not unusual, posed often by individuals unaccustomed to considering the oppressive elements of imposed notions of what is masculine and what is feminine are allowed to be. The second question was also not new. She adds, “Our talk of half an hour exemplified the creative power of the Rainbow. Our joint presence in the room that night provided a tentative trust that enabled us to talk honestly. I was able to phrase some remarks with: ‘You know how Mel talks about...’ We talked about her stereotypes, about reproductive freedom, about the struggle to overcome racism in the lesbian and gay community. Our talk that night, and the warmth of other connections we made that evening was an important example of what the Mel King campaign achieved.”

**Conclusion**

The Mel King campaign was rooted in all the progressive social movements that have had an impact on the city over the last twenty-five years. While gays and lesbians were seen by most of the candidates as a voting bloc, the King campaign publicly identified itself with a gay and lesbian movement. And because of the welcomed visibility of gays and lesbians in the campaign, and the public identification of Mel with that constituency, many campaign workers learned to challenge homophobia. When two teenage girls encountered a King campaign worker in one of Boston’s ethnic neighborhoods, the girls remarked, “You’re for King? He has all the weirdos behind him.” The campaign worker asked, ”Like who?”
"The liberals and queers," they answered. "So, what's wrong with that?" the campaign worker retorted. "They're weird," the girls repeated.

The lesbian and gay committee was successful in a number of ways. While internal education was minimal, given the hectic pace of a campaign, people's consciousness was raised by the persistence of committee members in raising gay/lesbian issues at every meeting. The alliance between King and Sondras workers meant a broader base of support was mobilized to counter BLGPA's failure to endorse either candidate in the preliminary--ultimately producing a victory for Sondras and a strengthening of grass roots activism against BLGPA's machine. In the final election BLGPA had little choice but to endorse King and Sondras.

Yet a vacuum remains after the election. The lesbian/gay committee, unlike other committees, overwhelmingly decided not to extend their work into the Jackson campaign. The distance between a presidential campaign and a local electoral campaign, along with Jackson's failure to actively support the gay/lesbian movement influenced the decision.

BLGPA has already moved to expand its base, Neighborhood groups (ward and precinct style) paralleling traditional electoral structures are being built. These groups will provide a social context in which gays/lesbians will find each other where they live. Given that is often in the neighborhoods where gays/lesbians feel most marginal and endangered, such developments are welcomed. But whether BLGPA's politics will be defining is unclear. The King campaign taught many of us that being active in the electoral arena is not necessarily in tension with "asking for what you want," as Mel said, "not what you think you can get." Thus a strong base exists, especially among feminists and Third World lesbians and gays, that can challenge BLGPA's traditional and narrow terms of electoral participation.
Another potential factor in determining the shape of gay politics will be whether neighborhood based progressive/left organizing takes up the gay/lesbian challenge to the neighborhoods. If the alliance built within the King campaign can extend themselves into the future, a radical gay/lesbian politics will be strengthened as will progressive/left politics in general.

FOOTNOTES

1. Here we mean legitimacy within a coalition effort, within Boston’s progressive politics, a legitimacy won by the strong mobilization of gays and lesbians against the rise of the New Right as we shall argue later.
2. DiCara’s campaign was geared both in terms of his Italian background and his young single status. Boston is a major center for young, single men and women—estimates are that it includes about 80,000 voters with gays a sub-category within that sector.
3. While the term “public sex” is used to describe sexual encounters between men in public places, in fact they take place out of public view.
4. See below for discussion of anti-gay initiatives.
8. Anita Bryant advertised Florida orange juice, thus a boycott of orange juice was initiated by gays and lesbians. As a result, Bryant lost her contract. For a discussion of the Briggs Initiative, see Amber Hollibaugh, “Sexuality and the State,” Socialist Review, No. 45 (May-June 1979) and Michael Ward and Mark Freeman, “Defending Gay Rights: The Campaign Against the Briggs Initiative in California,” Radical America, Vol. 13, No. 4 (July-August 1979).

Margaret Cerullo and Marla Erlien are editors of Radical America. Kate Raisz was a lesbian/gay coordinator for the Mel King campaign. Jessica Shubow was active in Women’s Pentagon Action.

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WHERE FREEDOM TRAILS:
Race and the Mayoral Election in Boston

John Demeter

"Boston's mayoral campaign was remarkable for a city that had come to symbolize racist hatred in the streets. The campaign was free of race-baiting, racial incidents and the kind of rhetoric that made the city ashamed in the recent past...Thanks to a largely issue-oriented campaign, and the high-minded approach taken by all the major candidates in the field, the Boston preliminary was a healing and cathartic experience. The campaign took Boston beyond the race question: the victors won on plain concerns of working class voters." David Nyhan, *Boston Globe*, Oct. 16, 1983.

It was a cool September night as I awaited the candidate in the lobby of a three-story walkup in Boston's North End. My assignment was to spot prospective guests and usher them upstairs to the first campaign house party for Mel King in this working class Italian neighborhood. There were no doorbells at the entrance and as I nervously smoked cigarettes in the hallway, I began to think about why this election was falling outside the high school civics book definition I remembered. The "KKK" scratched on the outside of the front door was one reason. The fact that my friend Lydia had to offer her apartment for the party on twenty-four hours notice was a second. Another King supporter had been forced to opt out as host when several of her neighbors complained "that people were talking about her" after her address had appeared on a locally distributed leaflet. I began to think about Mel walking by himself down the street that particular evening. It was one fear that was later to prove unfounded. But the atmosphere was charged, to say the least. I had already been questioned by the brother of the landlord as to why I was standing in the hall. "Just letting folks in for a small house party," I offered, knowing that any excuse was useless in the face of the rapid word of mouth in this "tight-knit" and densely populated community. The landlord himself appeared a few minutes later. "What are you doing here?", his tone a touch sharper
than his brother’s. “Just letting folks in for a party,” I muttered with less confidence. “Who’s apartment?” “Lydia’s, on the second floor.” “Oh, that artist girl.” I nodded as he stalked up the stairs.

Fearing the worst, I quietly followed him. He beckoned Lydia away from the seven or eight people already in her one-room studio and began bellowing at her a short distance down the hall. “This is my house. How dare you bring that man in here. Freddy Langone (another candidate) lives right down the street.”

Of course, neither he nor any of his family lived in this run-down apartment dwelling. Nor would they choose to. Communal bathrooms were located one to a floor. The upkeep of the common spaces and hallways was minimal. The Italian men’s social club in the basement and a downstairs cafe contributed to a steady roach infestation. But this particular “turf” — Boston’s Little Italy, a parcel of land home to 15,000 people — is in danger of disappearing.

Whether the landlord’s raving that night was motivated in part by displaced anger at that fate is doubtful. Given his recent reaction to another tenant who had brought a black friend to her apartment, and the general tenor of the community, racism was at the heart of his response.

This section on the northern tip of the city is in the midst of a transition that threatens not only its identity but the future of many of its accessibly priced housing units. For some of those who worked on the mayoral campaign here, and experienced first hand the controlling, male-dominated narrowmindedness that is part of this community’s social fabric, that transition might offer some change. But, the sweep of gentrification and displacement, and absorption into the great American melting pot will eventually serve only to scatter, not transform, social and cultural patterns. It is an experience that multi-ethnic communities like the West End and South End and Boston’s black community have learned first hand in the last twenty years. And the resulting anger and resentment winds its way to an easy and misplaced target — the fear of other neighborhood and social groups.

Frequented for its restaurants and food shops and the historical landmarks of America’s Revolutionary War period, the North End is crisscrossed with narrow streets lined with three- to five story brick apartment buildings. Bordering the city’s waterfront, a tunnel, and an expressway, it is kept from the total insularity of areas like East and South Boston by its proximity to the downtown section. The fact of this proximity is not lost, however, on condo and cooperative developers. Crowds of middle-aged and elderly Italian men cluster on the sidewalks in small groups from early in the morning until late at night. Most speak in Italian. They serve as part cultural artifact, part “Guardian Angel.” Women in the neighborhood who do not work outside the home can be spotted in the laundromats and stores and, at mid-afternoon, waiting for their children outside the schoolyards. Reconstruction of abandoned factories and redeveloped walkups on the outskirts of the area hint at the influx of condominiums and luxury apartments that are slowly edging toward Hanover Street, the center of the neighborhood. One local politician has estimated that half of the area’s residents have moved within the last three years.

Walking door to door in the North End offers a much different look from the usual tourist haunts. Hallway walls with peeling paint, rusting tin mailboxes in lobbies, and broken locks on entranceways are standard. Inside the apartments, there is a frequent lack of shower facilities in the older units. At least two meetings of campaign workers ended with shared stories of makeshift substitutes — from hose hookups over kitchen sinks to wading pools in the living room. There are at least three public bathhouses in the area. In short, it is an area with a strong history, a diminishing future due to speculation and forces of “development” and a present pockmarked with fear and uncertainty.

Enter the 1983 mayoral race and a final election that offered two candidates whose platforms were based on returning the city to the neighborhoods, of distributing the benefits of downtown developers and real estate interests to the neglected “little people” of the city. For Italians in Boston, disenfranchisement is still part of their experience, with the city’s political machinery in the control of Boston’s Irish who
who had initiated the city’s redistricting, the Jobs Program and who had publicly and consistently worked to heal the city’s racial strife, I was reminded that, in many people’s eyes, his most visible attribute was in being born black. For all the arguments that the two candidates in the final mayoral election were “cut from the same cloth,” for all the lack of attention to the issue of race, for all the self-congratulatory back-patting about the transcending of racial division, this campaign was one of race. And the Mel King campaign had to be understood as an anti-racist campaign. The obscuring of this fact reflected problems with the platform and structure of the campaign as well as from without — in the denial of that issue in the media, among politicians, and by certain sectors of the left and progressive communities.

A City Divided

For the left, feminist, gay, Third World and community activists who worked on the King campaign, the heart and soul of this effort rested as much with the person of Mel King as with the social movements of this city’s recent history. In particular, the black and women’s movements, and to a lesser extent, the anti-racist movement, provided a link with processes that had produced significant transformations in the people and institutions of the Greater Boston area. In providing individual and organizational support, they also contributed to the campaign’s operational viability. The legacy of a city, however, that was divided by race and isolated into separate and equally
neglected neighborhoods hung overhead. Most significantly, the campaign began with a litany of attempts at citywide, multicultural and integrated organizing to guide its work. Groups of progressive whites thus found themselves thrust, many for the first time, into serious and intense work with Boston’s communities of color. The exhilaration of cultural sharing and the respect built through cooperative work (much of it under pressure) certainly provided a model for future cooperation. As post election evaluation sessions revealed, the experience also left its strains as well.*

For those of us organizing in communities like the North End, the lack of neighborhood organizers was critical. As one by-product of the racial polarization heightened by the busing crisis, few reform groups did even attempt entering white enclaves like South Boston, Charlestown or Hyde Park. Those that did, organized around economic issues such as housing and utility rates and tended to shun social or equality questions in their work.**Thus while the King campaign posed links between racial and sexual equality and economic matters, in the charged atmosphere of a community desperately holding onto personal and social privilege, they were difficult to assert. Even the “cloak of legitimacy” provided by campaigning for a “serious” candidate proved to be transparent. In the tense era of the downtown development boom in Boston, the physical decay of the neighborhoods was as evident as their social isolation. So, even when the eventual winner of the mayoral race, Raymond Flynn, offered the observation during the campaign that “the problems of South Boston and Roxbury were the same,” it was clear that few white residents even shared that view. They knew that they were better off. For as rundown as some of their sections were, a black mayor would “only bring his people into my neighborhood.” (author’s italics) as one North End resident told me.

While Mel sought to constantly remind his supporters and workers throughout the campaign that his effort was about “empowerment and inclusion” and that “in putting good vibes out to people, you'll get good vibes back,” some of the reactions in the North End were a stark reminder that, intentionally or not, this effort had to be seen as part of a “fight back.” Attempts to reverse the gains of the social movements of the last two decades were not only in keeping with the national “conservative agenda” but served to divert attention from the economic and social costs of that program. In such threatening times, an expansive world view was replaced by the safe, protected view from the neighborhood or family. Despite the fact that the King campaign represented a unique merger of advocacy for the poor, women, minorities and disenfranchised, it struck its most notable chord in reminding white Boston of the city’s recent racial turmoil.

Following that first “house party,” the North End committee began work with a core group of seven people. The excitement generated by Mel’s victory in the preliminary swelling

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* Candice Cason deals with some of these questions in her article in this issue. From the evaluation sessions I attended, these strains of subtle and overt racism ranged from language (referring to the campaign office in North Dorchester as the “Roxbury office” when it represented the distinct—though also predominantly black—communities of North Dorchester, Roxbury and Mattapan) to policy and organization. These latter areas included, among others, the campaign’s dissolution of the Black Community Coordinating Committee after the preliminary election, the underrepresentation of Third World people at the main headquarters and the continuous “assumption” by many white workers that the Boston black community was “safe” and needed less attention than white areas. The necessity of autonomous interest groups within coalitions like the King campaign was one byproduct that carried over to black presence in the post-election formation of the Boston Rainbow Coalition. It was a perspective also strongly shared by women and gays and lesbians.

** One particular example I experienced involved Mass. Fair Share which works on issues ranging from traffic lights to utility costs to redlining by banks. In 1976, they were organizing white homeowners in Hyde Park to oppose real estate speculation in that neighborhood. At the same time, newly arrived black homeowners in the previously all white area were being attacked by area youth. The same speculative pressures were encouraging “white flight” by selling deliberately to black families and realizing larger profits by quick sales. Fair Share organizers refused to allow one of the black families to address their community meetings in an effort to try to ease the tension. One organizer told me their purpose in the area was simply to deal with “block busting.”
our numbers fourfold. We were the largest contingent working in one of Boston’s “white” areas. All but three of us (myself included) were residents of the neighborhood. With residences ranging from nine months to twelve years, however, we were open to being described as “outsiders.”* But by force of will, and a constant schedule of telephone canvassing, door to door leafletting and frequent sign holding, we surprised the older politicos. With two Italian-speaking volunteers, furthermore, we were able to produce bilingual flyers and contact non English speaking residents. We researched the controversy around a proposed fifteen year public works project to depress the expressway that abuts the North End and helped produce a position paper for the campaign. We circulated bilingual flyers with our candidate’s position on the issue and took part in neighborhood forums. Despite all this effort, the business community and local political infrastructure remained non-committal at best. There were hints of support “after the preliminary” that failed to materialize even when the two Italian-American candidates were defeated in that election. Window signs in stores and dwellings abounded for several candidates but we found only one store owner who would post a King placard—which he kept inside his market. The most positive responses we received came from two groups—younger women and older Italian men. The former because of King’s positions on women’s issues and the latter due to an openness to radical ideas (these were largely Italian-born and some had hinted at ‘political’ activity in their native land) and a lack of the racism more commonly expressed by the second and third generation Italian residents. But no amount of organizing could replace the good will and effectiveness of the candidate himself.

On the Street

When Mel joined us for walking tours of the area, visiting shops and parks, I was constantly amazed at the response. While there certainly were brusque handshakes and avoiding glances, the reaction was warm and friendly. His long history in Boston and familiarity with the people and locale (and his media stock) cut through the racial and political barriers. Mel’s appearance on the tours and at house meetings, raised two reminders about our experience in the area. One was the different response campaign workers experienced when he wasn’t present, the other was that we were an all-white labor force. Without Mel, the legitimacy of electoral work did not shield us from openly racist reaction. Passing drivers would vehemently thrust middle fingers as we held signs and taunts of “Nigger lover!” and “Niggers suck!” would follow us as we distributed literature. One of our cars had its tires slashed and two workers were forced by landlords to stop storing posters in their apartments. Even more disconcerting were the quiet whispers of reassurance that someone was voting for Mel but couldn’t take a leaflet or post a sign for fear of family, landlord or “public” reaction. I remember feeling particularly discouraged when someone I had known casually before the campaign recounted her response when neighbors complained about her bringing a black co-worker home for dinner one evening. “But, you know,” she told me, “I understand it somehow, it’s their neighborhood and I’ve just come to accept it. Some things never change.” Not only was she Italian-American but she had lived in the North End for twelve years. For other people, the campaign actually provided an intervention. Two women contacted by our phone canvassers spoke openly about their bitterness at having black friends harassed. One woman commented, “I’m glad you called. I’ve been thinking about calling the campaign office about this. What can I do?” For many of the campaign volunteers, as well, the experience brought them into a position of directly confronting racism. Many of them had no prior political experience, in either electoral or progressive causes, but their support for this candidate who happened to be black cast them into directly antiracist activity. With the pressures of the campaign, particularly as it intensified

*In terms of the neighborhood’s ethnic and class makeup, it was the leadership of our committee more so than the profile of our membership that defined us as “outsiders.” The coordinators for the other candidates were local residents but a number of their volunteers came from around the city. In the final campaign, regular volunteers from Irish neighborhoods joined the Flynn forces in the North End but received no response similar to ours.
after the preliminary, we didn’t consider raising the issue as an item of internal education beyond how to respond and deflect such attacks.

While Mel raised the need for “accessibility” of the city and its neighborhoods for all residents, as an all-white force we could not challenge that situation in the North End. The question of multiracial volunteer crews was not addressed in any coordinating session by either the campaign leadership or the community representatives. We were guided solely by the campaign leadership directive that the core of work be done by “residents” of the neighborhoods. Most clearly, given the violence that the campaign encountered around the city that fall,* it certainly would have provoked a reaction. I remember distinctly my fear when a black volunteer did show up for one of our leaflet drops. In need of extra help we had contacted the campaign’s volunteer phone bank and been given a name and telephone number. In our rush we hadn’t noticed that the telephone exchange was that of the city’s Roxbury section. And as the color-blindness of phone contacts go, we arranged for him to join us. His stint in the North End was without incident—but that was most likely due to the fact that we leafleted doorways and mailboxes early Sunday afternoons, when almost all the residents were settled down to traditional family dinners. It was unlikely, given the early tenor of the campaign which sought not to emphasize Flynn’s anti-busing history that such a proposal (using black workers) would have been encouraged. But some manner of integrating community meetings or forums would have

*Another misimpression in national press coverage was that of a campaign free of “racial incidents.” In addition to what transpired in the North End, there were similar reports of verbal and physical threats across the city. Volunteers were twice chased by groups of white youths in South Boston. A bullet was fired through the window of the Allston-Brighton campaign headquarters. Numerous death threats directed at the candidate were received at the main office. On the day of the final election, telephone bomb threats were reported at three campaign offices.

Despite Boston’s long-time image as the “cradle of liberty,” the incidents have quite a few historical precedents. In the 1830s, arch-abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison was beaten by a mob in downtown Boston and several of his followers murdered.
been a positive step rather than the unconscious acceptance of the neighborhood's inaccessibility to people of color. Another approach would have been for the King campaign leadership to confront the other candidates and their operatives in specific neighborhoods on this question and elicit their "help." For us, this actually took place when one of our coordinators mentioned the harassment to the Flynn North End coordinator. He agreed to accompany us when we took part in a feeder march through the North End that was part of a citywide Rainbow rally in early November. While his gesture was appreciated, I still bristled at the social dynamic that allowed him to offer us protection in this manner.

All the News that Fits

On the day of the new mayor's inauguration, the Boston Globe's lead editorial cited improving racial tensions as the first priority for the incoming administration. The editorial followed two major reports in that paper in the weeks after the November 15 election that
didate Mel King to denounce the act as "murder" and re-raise his demand for a Boston Police Review Board.

Organizing around Third World issues took on a strong anti-racist character in Boston, given the particularities of the city's racial history. Most of the effort remained on area campuses, however, except for the large Amandla concert in 1979 which raised money for Southern Africa liberation movements and attracted the largest multiracial crowd for a cultural event in the city's history. Featuring the late Bob Marley, Eddie Palmieri, LaBelle and local performers, the concert was attended by over 15,000 people. One offshoot of the concert was the establishment of a Rock Against Racism group of radio personalities and local organizers who continue to visit Boston area schools and promote multiracial sharing through music.

In 1979, high school football player Daryl Williams was shot and paralyzed by a sniper while he scrimmaged with his team in the all white Charlestown section. The incident provoked a march of 800 people during Pope John Paul's visit to Boston two weeks later. Led by then-Mass. Rep. Mel King, the march attempted to bring Boston's racial troubles to the attention of the Pope and pressure the city's religious hierarchy (Boston is predominantly Roman Catholic) to take public initiative to end the violence.

Though King's leadership and the timing of the march were heavily criticized in local media and religious circles as "confrontational," shortly afterwards the Boston Archbishop, Cardinal Humberto Medeiros, along with religious leaders of other denominations, put forth a call for a "Racial Covenant" to be signed by all the city's residents. Deploiring violence and calling for racial peace, the Covenant was symbolized by red buttons with a multicolored olive branch. The effort received wide support but failed to leave any lasting organizational body in its wake.

John Demeter
directly contrasted its downplaying of "race" during the mayoral campaign. The first report was a three-part study of six major US cities that investigated the quality of life for Third World residents in each locale. The conclusion was that Boston was the most difficult for people of color with regard to housing, employment and "racial attitudes." The second study detailed a report of the federal Economic Opportunity Commission which indicated clear patterns of discrimination in pay, hiring and promotion in large businesses. For the numerous stories and editorials during the campaign citing the "new tolerance" evidenced by Mel King's victory in the preliminary, the later revelations must have come as quite a shock.

As for the Flynn campaign, three incidents highlighted its lack of sensitivity to the black community and the candidacy of Mel King. A letter from local progressives for Flynn, the most prominent of whom were Peter Dreier* (a housing activist and member of the Democratic Socialists of America) and Nancy Snyder (director of Nine to Five, an organization for women office workers), arrived in the mail shortly before the preliminary election. Emphasizing the candidate's role on housing and economic questions, the letter sidestepped his reactionary past record on race and minimized his position on women's issues. In a thinly veiled reference to King, who had been climbing in the polls, the letter declared, "This is no time for a symbolic vote... Ray Flynn is the one progressive candidate in the race who can win."

A short while later, the Flynn campaign began airing a television commercial that showed a chess board with a single black piece. As the voice-over intoned, "This is not a game. Don't waste your vote on election day," the black piece was replaced by a white knight. This from the candidate one newspaper referred to as the "Lech Walesa of Boston politics."

Perhaps the most striking incident took place the week of October 8 when David Finnegan, the early frontrunner who was being overtaken in the polls by both Flynn and King, denounced Flynn's use of separate neighborhood tabloids for black and white sections of the city's Dorchester section. In the tabloids for the black community, Flynn appeared in pictures with black residents and mentioned his concern for "equal rights." For the white areas, the tabloids featured only white subjects and included no mention of equal rights. The resultant flap caused Flynn to withdraw the tabloids and agree not to use similar "targeted" material. The atmosphere was filled with anger as Flynn retorted that his opponent was using the issue to recover his early standing by playing to the black community. Ironically, the incident seems to have evoked a lot of sympathy for Flynn—in white neighborhoods. King's response was not to enter into the squabble and to continue to project a moderate and "healing" tone. To campaign gatherings, however, the candidate was quick to point out that "We're winning when two candidates are

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*In signing the Progressives for Flynn letter, both individuals noted that organizational affiliations were for identification purposes only. DSA did not endorse a candidate in the preliminary and endorsed King in the final. Both Snyder and Dreier are now members of the Flynn administration.
attacking each other as racist—and they’re both white.” He was correct in assessing the ability of his campaign to raise racism on the agenda but, in not questioning the sincerity of their responses, an opportunity to expose both their records was lost. Such an intervention would have provided an entrance point for the debates before the final election. As it developed, the King campaign strategy switch to raise Flynn’s past record (and his self-avowed role as racial peacemaker) in the latter stages of the campaign came off awkwardly and was bated as divisive by the Globe and other local media.

The Final Tally

Citywide, and in the North End, the election results were quite telling. Despite the fact that Mel King finished with 20 percent of the white vote in the city (a figure unsurpassed by first time black mayoral candidates), in white neighborhoods like South Boston, West Roxbury, Hyde Park, East Boston, and Roslindale, his totals in both preliminary and final ranged only from 5 to 10 percent. His 15 percent total in the preliminary in the North End, however, grew to 25 percent in the final! The rise was even more dramatic in the inner, more heavily ethnic precincts than in the two precincts that had experienced a large influx of young, white professionals. As for questions as to whether voters simply voted for the “better” of the two urban populists, it is interesting to note that an exit poll conducted by WBZ-TV revealed that 94 percent of those who voted for pro-business conservative David Finnegan in the preliminary cast their final ballots for Ray Flynn.* Post-election analysis further posited that although two “populists” with progressive politics were the final candidates for mayor in 1983, the “mandate” for Flynn was racial in character and conservative in tone. John O’Bryant and Jean McGuire, incumbent black School Committee members, dropped noticeably in their vote totals from high finishes in past elections, narrowly making the cut. Conservative whites led the City Council at-large race and a

leader of South Boston’s rabidly racist anti-busing forces, Jim Kelly, won the District Two Council seat—narrowly defeating a liberal human service administrator. Flynn did not take sides in that race in his home district. Typical of the antics of Kelly and fellow councillor Albert O’Neil was their refusal to sign on a City Council resolution in April honoring the late Clarence Mitchell, a long time civil rights activist. They refused on grounds that Mitchell worked for the NAACP, a “racist” organization.

Five months after the election, the ramifications of Mel King’s candidacy are still being felt. Late in March, Mayor Flynn personally delivered a $683 thousand check to the family of a black hospital worker killed by Boston Police in 1975. For four years the city government had refused to pay a court-awarded judgment. It was an issue both King and Flynn took up in the campaign and pledged to honor if elected. While the related question of a police review board, advocated by King, has been left untouched by Flynn—a sensitive area for the new mayor and his allies in the police patrolmen’s union—the agenda of the city is now, at least symbolically, moving away from its recent history. But while Flynn seems initially committed to addressing the legacy of the King campaign, the question of whether the risk of alienating some of his more racist constituency will temper his future actions remains to be seen.

The morning after the final election, a North End King supporter walked into her neighborhood newsstand still wearing her rainbow button. Glancing over to her, the proprietor quietly cautioned, “I think that for your own safety, you’d better take that off.” “Why?” she responded. “The election’s over, he lost, what’s the harm?” Added the storeowner, “Just take my advice. People are talking about you and the coloreds.” The story is a sobering reminder about the “corner” Boston has not turned yet.

FOOTNOTES

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The Harold Washington mayoral election was a historical event of great significance. The success of Chicago’s mass movements in the electoral arena is a source of renewal and of inspiration. The point of this paper is to outline the main historical background that shaped the mayoral election in Chicago in 1983, so that we can draw out the present and future implications of the Chicago experience, both for national and local urban politics in general, and for black liberation protest politics in particular.

Black Politics in Chicago: An Outline

The development of Chicago mayoral administrations was summed up this way by Donald Bradley:

The type of men recruited for the mayoralty changed over the 125 years of Chicago's
history. The office was initially (1837-1869) the prerogative of the early promoters and original business elite of the community. Alteration in the economic structure of the city, the proliferation of public services and official responsibilities, the qualitative and quantitative changes in the population, however, all created a new trend in political recruitment. The rapid change experienced by the city in all of its aspects produced an atmosphere conducive to the cult of the personality that obtained between 1880 and 1930. The 1930s saw the stabilization of the community and the ascendency of a dominant party machine. Thus, between 1931 and the present, the chief elected office in the city has been held by a group of political entrepreneurs who came up through the ranks of the party organization.

When viewed in the broad perspectives of the changes that have taken place in Chicago, two factors stand out as responsible for the observed trend in political leadership: the desirability of political office for those differentially situated in the community fabric, and the type and distribution of political resources within the community. Related to, but analytically distinct from, the ambition to hold political office is the ability to muster the necessary support.1

Black politics fits this model to some extent. Early black politicians from 1870 to the 1920s were individualists who attached themselves to a political faction when it served their ends, and frequently changed sides as political expediency dictated. They were "race men" in that their

overriding concern, as individuals, was to work for the good of black people, or community.

A second stage in black politics emerged when the "black submachine" was built. James Q. Wilson identifies its origins:

The Negro machine owes its existence in part to the existence of a city-wide Democratic machine; it is, to use a clumsy phrase, a "submachine" within the larger city machine. Although, Negroes have held important political office in Chicago since 1915 (when Oscar de Priest was elected alderman) in Cook County since 1871 (although continuously only since 1938), and in the Illinois State Legislature since 1876, the rise of the present Negro machine did not begin until 1939. In that year, Dawson, an independent Republican who had served in the City Council, switched parties and, with the active support of Mayor Edward Kelly, entered the Democratic Party as committeeman of the second ward. Real political power in Chicago is vested in the ward committeemen. Although nominally they are elected by the voters of each ward, in fact, they are selected by the party leadership. All political matters, including the control of patronage, are decided by the ward committeemen, either individually on matters within each ward, or collectively on matters concerning the party as a whole. Negro political strength is coterminous with the number of Negro ward committeemen and the existence of a single Negro machine is dependent on the extent to which these Negro ward committeemen can be led as a group by one of their number.2

Beginning with massive civil rights demonstrations in the 1960s, a third stage began to emerge—indepentend politics. Rooted in radical movements, and including activists who would later rise to prominence (e.g., Harold Washington, Gus Savage, Bennett Johnson) blacks began a movement often discussed as "Protest at the Polls," the first organized thrust for black political power. At times they supported regular Democrats, but by the time of the militant anti-Daley demonstrations in the 1960s, a stream of independents began banging

Oscar De Priest (left) first black on Chicago City Council and first black member of U.S. Congress since Reconstruction; John Jones (right) abolitionist and first elected black official in Chicago, Cook County Commissioner.
on the door of City Hall.

Despite these actions, they gained little substantial benefit for the masses. The 1960s, a decade characterized by sustained mass protest, struggle, and involvement, won some benefits for middle-class blacks. But in Chicago, the middle class lost interest in local voting because they had not derived sufficient material gain from it. Further, the machine did not work for a large voter turnout, so the masses of blacks were not encouraged to vote.

Daley and the Machine

Richard J. Daley's tenure in office (1955-1976) was important in several respects. First, he presided over the structural transformation of Chicago from an industrial city into a monopoly metropolis where the leading role in the economy was played by corporate banking, insurance, and investment capital organizations. Second, Daley was able to hold together a tenuous political coalition including increasing numbers of blacks who could not be readily absorbed into the patronage exchange system. Local contradictions which were apparent within the old Democratic coalition were held in abeyance by the influx of urban renewal dollars into the central city and under control of "The Mayor."

The undisputed dominant figure in the Democratic Party, Daley was pointman for the Irish, and administered their disproportionate control of power and jobs despite their declining numbers and percentage of the population. In 1955, when Daley was first elected, the Irish were 10 percent of the population, but held one-third of the City Council positions. Irish mayors have been in office from 1933 to 1983,
except for 1976–1979 (when Daley’s floor manager in the City Council, a Croatian, was installed after Daley’s sudden death). This has been a source of grievance to the Polish, the largest white ethnic group in Chicago, who have never had their own mayor.

Many interest groups were co-opted and held together by the machine, through an exchange of material rewards for delivering the vote based on precinct organizations within the wards. Jobs and economic favors were differentially and disproportionately allocated. Irish votes counted more than black votes, and blacks were given jobs on the lower levels, in the less well-paying agencies. The black middle class was given honorific positions of status with little control of jobs because they could not be trusted to hire “right”—meaning, hire mainly loyal Democrats and blacks who would work for the organization.

Daley was unopposed for four of his six elections. He was a formidable opponent who could scream four-letter words on national television, order police to shoot and kill looters during riots, and force prominent civil rights leaders to give him the “black power” handshake. In fact, when he did these things, working-class white ethnics loved him even more.

Things began to change in 1975 when Daley was challenged in the primary by an independent (William Singer), a reform-oriented black (Richard Newhouse), and an out-of-favor machine hack (Edward Hanrahan, the infamous butcher who ordered the murder of Fred Hampton of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in 1969). Then Daley died on December 20, 1976. As in all political regimes run by a strong leader, the question of succession is a critical issue, and it is here that the seemingly invincible machine revealed its internal tensions, and fundamental weaknesses.

**Post-Daley Factionalism**

The position of president pro tem of the Chicago City Council had been held by three blacks (Ralph Metcalfe, Claude Holman, and Wilson Frost) up to Daley’s death. When Daley died, Frost believed that conventional constitutional precedent would elevate him to the position of acting mayor. Armed Chicago police met him at the mayor’s office, however, and rudely turned him away. Power was seized by using the armed force of the state, and blacks on the City Council were forced to swallow pride of self and community in exchange for frost becoming chair of the Council’s finance committee. Michael Bilandic, a Croatian who was Daley’s Council leader, became the fourth consecutive mayor from the predominantly Irish 11th ward.

The special election in 1977 attracted some challengers: Roman Pucinski (running for the Polish), Harold Washington (replacing Newhouse as the black reform candidate), and Edward Hanrahan (the machine renegade). This was the last race to be controlled by the old machine regulars. Blacks were now less reliable.
and no charismatic white candidate who could rally the old coalition was in sight.

Bilandic was not an exciting mayor. He presided over factional fights and simply tried to hold things together. An academic insider, Milton Rakove, in his book Don’t Make No Waves, Don’t Back No Losers, sums up the end of the Bilandic administration:

In the winter of 1978, one year into Bilandic’s mayorality, there was, however, a minor upheaval of some consequence. Jane Byrne, who was Commissioner of Consumer Sales, Weights and Measures, a small city department, accused Bilandic in the media of “greasing” the city's taxi-cab companies with regard to a projected fare increase. After a short brouhaha in the press between Byrne and Bilandic, the mayor fired the Commissioner.

Byrne, aggrieved by her sudden dismissal, convinced that the new regime headed by Bilandic constituted “an evil cabal” that had corrupted the political organization and city government built by her mentor, Richard J. Daley, and bent on revenge for the wrongs done to her and Daley, announced that she would run for mayor against Bilandic in the February 1979 primary. . . .

Under normal circumstances, Bilandic and the machine would not have suffered from their political mistake. But the winter of 1978–79 was not normal. The worst snowstorm in the city’s history paralyzed the city and aroused the citizenry. The city government’s inability to clear the snow away, the breakdown of public transportation and garbage collection, the anti-

By January 1983, the combined total of black registrations was 610,000 out of an estimated 750,000 eligible black voters. These potential voters had to be protected from challenges by the machine-controlled Board of Election Commissioners. This was done successfully, mainly through strong community monitoring and vigilance.

Then in November 1982, although the black community leadership was lukewarm about Adlai Stevenson candidacy, the black turnout against Republican Governor James Thompson was overwhelming. This mobilization demonstrated to the black leadership and to Washington supporters in particular, that the black community would unite to support a viable black candidate for Mayor.  

The Washington strategy had been predicated on at least two strong white Democratic Party candidates vying for the primary nomination. The theory was that Byrne and Daley would split the white vote and neither could afford to attack Washington for fear of alienating the black vote. The campaign was the most expensive (over $18 million was spent), the most corrupt (Byrne’s blatant payoffs to

| Table 1 |
|---------------------|------------|--------|----------------|--------|--------|----------------|
| POLITICAL MOBILIZATION OF RACIAL-NATIONALITY GROUPS: REGISTRATION AND TURNOUT AS PERCENTAGE OF VOTING AGE POPULATION, 1979–1983 |
| Registration | Turnout |
| Black | Latino | White | Black | Latino | White |
| Primary 1979 | 69.4 | 31.5 | 77.4 | 34.5 | 18.3 | 50.6 |
| General 1982 | 86.7 | 35.1 | 78.3 | 55.8 | 20.9 | 54.0 |
| Primary 1983 | 87.2 | 36.1 | 82.2 | 64.2 | 23.9 | 64.6 |
| General 1983 | 89.1 | 37.0 | 83.2 | 73.0 | 24.3 | 67.2 |
street gangs), the most polarized along race/nationality lines (Byrne and Epton share the laurels), and the most publicized (internationally, nationally, and locally) mayoral race in Chicago history. More people participated in the primary and general elections than in any other election in Chicago history, and more white people voted on the losing side than in any two successive elections in the city's history. Going into the 1983 Democratic primary, the Chicago black electorate had three choices. As it turned out, Byrne represented the present and Daley the past, while Washington was identified with their aspirations for the future.

Harold Washington joins Mel King in Boston. Dick Gregory (left-standing) joins Washington (left front), Mel and Joyce King at South End rally.

The Incumbent

Byrne's 1979 campaign strength had been among middle-class and working women, the neighborhoods, and seniors. But she was not able to hold her electoral coalition together for very long after her election for several reasons. First, she was saddled by a deepening fiscal crisis that affected her relation with city employees. In order to keep spending in line to satisfy creditors, as well as to protect her base among white homeowners, Byrne was forced to hold down salaries and block further increases in social expenditures given the city's declining tax base.

Second, in order to govern, she had to accommodate the machine leadership which demanded a free hand with patronage and the opportunity to make deals that, once exposed, revealed the depth of political corruption. This caused a further loss of credibility, especially among the liberal opinion makers in the media. Byrne apparently was willing to accept this accommodation so long as she was able to swell her "war chest." Byrne raised some $10 million for political campaigning by the primary opening. A large proportion of this money came from city workers (a source of resentment) and from agents with city contracts.

Third, she reorganized the Office of Neighborhoods as a device to promote her image and to secure re-election as opposed to providing a channel for mass input into community development policy. Moreover, she alienated community leaders by reducing and then re-routing the flow of money out of neighborhood development programs and into "downtown" projects.

Fourth, while leaving her doors open to real estate developers and business contractors, Byrne lost credibility with many among the corporate elite who viewed her as politically unstable, prone to quick changes of both policy and personnel. Thus, she contributed to an unfavorable business situation by failing to provide a climate for continuity of program, personnel and policy making in government leadership.

Fifth, while consolidating her alliances with the most reactionary and irresponsible wing of the Democratic party, she alienated herself from the mainstream of the party. On the one hand, not having strong connections with the corporate and declining industrial elite, she was forced to build up her coffers by repeatedly "tapping" city patronage workers in addition to contractors doing business with the city. On the other hand, Byrne encouraged further fragmentation of the Cook County Democratic party and instead of uniting the party, she undermined her most organized potential base of support. She did this in the following ways:

1. dropping President Carter after earlier endorsing him in order to support Kennedy during the 1980 presidential campaign;
2. opposing Daley as State's Attorney in favor of Ed Burke in the 1980 primary and Bernard Carey, a Republican during the general election;
3. closely identifying with Reagan and becoming the only mayor of a large city not to oppose his domestic and urban policies; and

4. opposing former party chairman George Dunne and supporting Bernard Carey, the Republican candidate for Cook County Board President.

Finally, Byrne made a series of tactical blunders that undermined her brittle support among blacks and Latinos.

1. She attempted to play off blacks against Latinos on the one hand while exploiting the nationality differences among the various groups within the Latino population in the city. She did this mainly through her appointive powers (i.e., replacing Kenneth Smith, a black minister who chaired the School Board, with a Cuban, Raul Vialobos).

2. She made a series of white appointments replacing black and Latino representation on other boards, commissions, and within departments.

3. She played the role of a “sacrificing public official,” learning firsthand what the people faced. Byrne is from the 42nd ward, which encompasses what Chicagoans called the “Gold Coast and the Slums.” She lived in the Gold Coast; it is contrasted by the Cabrini-Green housing development (known for the TV show “Good Times”) in the slum. Byrne, amid tremendous publicity, “moved in” to Cabrini. While she was there with her personal protection, crime was reduced. But she soon left, and it was worse than ever. Elevators would go out for weeks, leaving senior citizens and the sick under a sinister form of de facto house arrest. The gangs retaliated against families who were able to avoid the mass evictions as so-called “anti-social” elements. The outcome of this drama was that many of the people who initially praised Byrne for her actions in Cabrini were later neutralized by reports that services were being withdrawn from other CHA developments to support a temporary publicity stunt.

In general, Jane Byrne initiated policies and actions which served to dilute black representation and divert public resources out of the black community at a period when it was experiencing a sharp downward turn in their relative standard of living. Byrne underestimated the preparedness of blacks to resist, and of Latinos
and poor whites to rally in support of black protest.

Byrne ran against the machine, won, and then the machine took power after the election. The “evil cabal” became her closest advisors, and the people she feared most were those who had elected her. Further, her protest vote had also elected new young black Democrats to the City Council—Danny Davis, Niles Sherman, Timothy Evans, and Marian Humes—all with independent postures. She had to deliver, or be challenged as she had done to Bilandic. Byrne blew it. She gave virtually every aspect of the movement fuel for building a protest movement against the machine. Further, and more decisively, she did this when black and progressive forces were conscious that they had created her with their votes and could eliminate her the same way.

The Byrne Interregnum and Mass Protest

In the period from 1967 to 1979, black representation in the City Council leaped to virtual proportional representation. From 1918 to 1947, there were only two blacks in City Council. By Byrne’s inauguration there were sixteen blacks in City Council. Byrne’s administration becomes important in several respects. First, a significant number of black aldermen within the Council began to vote consistently against the machine on issues viewed as vital to the black community. Second, and related to the first, black aldermen came under mounting pressure from a black electorate which had demonstrated a growing tendency to withdraw support from machine-backed candidates in primary elections. This forced black aldermen to take more independent stances particularly around representational issues (i.e., black appointments to public housing, public school and police review boards, etc.). Finally, and in conjunction, local activists involved in a series of welfare and substantive issues targeted Jane Byrne’s administration and the mayor’s office as the focus of protest against the deteriorating conditions blacks faced in housing, health care, employment, distribution of welfare benefits, and educational opportunity.

Thus, a most important dimension of the 1982 voter registration drive was the linkage of organizations and community activists involved in struggle around “economic” issues into city-wide networks which aimed their protest demands at City Hall.

The People’s Choice

Beginning in 1980, a movement to find a Black mayor began again. A “Committee For a Black Mayor” had been formed in 1974. In 1977, Harold Washington tested the waters and garnered 77,000 votes. Now, anticipating the 1983 election, a consensus-building process had emerged. A variety of surveys within the black community all showed that Washington was the strongest potential candidate. By the summer of 1981, led by some activists from across the city, a concerted movement began to “draft” Washington. Harold Washington had been a Democratic Party regular, the son of a precinct captain whose position he assumed, but he bolted the party machine in 1975 and became an independent. He had achieved national visi-
bility as the popularly elected replacement for Ralph Metcalfe as Congressman, and he was elected national vice-president of the liberal Americans for Democratic Action.

Washington knew that low electoral participation was a serious historical problem facing any "challenger" who represented excluded constituencies. The Chicago Urban League had issued a report on this problem in September 1981: *Why Chicago Blacks Do Not Register and Vote*. It began with a focus on the 1983 mayoral election:

If Black political participation could be increased five percent to ten percent, Blacks might effectively determine the outcome of this crucial election. Within a year after that, control of the City Council and most services of city government also may well be at stake.

Analyzing whether the 5 to 10 percent increase was possible, the report offered eight reasons why blacks don't register and vote; heading the list were "not interested in any of the candidates" (49.4 percent) and "fed up with the whole political system" (32.2 percent).

Lack of electoral participation appears to be a long-term, deeply rooted "structural" problem—one for which electoral reform and other superficial stop gap measures can only have very limited and temporary success... Sizeable, sustainable increases in Black registration and voting are unlikely without a rather fundamental effort to make politics and public affairs a much larger part of Black family and community life. 4

The Campaign Buildup: Voter Registration

While many of the traditional institutionalized organizations (i.e., NAACP, Chicago Urban League, PUSH) had attempted to build for a mass black community registration as early as the previous year, the highly significant aspect of the pre-primary voter registration drive was marked by the entrance of grassroots community efforts both within and outside of the black community. Several community groups contributed to the effort (e.g., Chicago Black United Communities, Vote Community, Peoples Movement for Voter Registration, PUSH) but the most innovative contribution was made by POWER, a citywide coalition of welfare recipients and unemployed workers under the leadership of heads of community-based organizations among blacks, whites, and Latinos. POWER concentrated on nontraditional sites for registering previously alienated new voters (e.g. welfare recipients, youth, and the hard-core unemployed).

The black leadership in most of these groups became the principal actors in the formation of the Task Force for Black Political Empowerment, which emerged as the informal arm of Harold Washington’s campaign organization. Added to these efforts was the significant infusion of money from black businessmen to the voter registration drive. Most notable was a cosmetic industry millionaire, Ed Gardner (Soft Sheen).

By September 1982, the earlier goal of 50,000 new registered voters had been reached with the tactic of mobile registrations—taking registration stations to welfare and unemployment offices within the city’s South, West and North
Sides. Washington’s response was to increase the call to register 100,000 new voters! The leadership of this movement answered him. With combined efforts of POWER, PUSH, Vote Community, People’s Movement, CBUC, and Citizens for Self-Determination, an all-out campaign was launched to meet this challenge. Churches were targeted, as were public aid offices, while library centers were established and an extensive absentee-ballot thrust was coordinated by PUSH and CBUC. Gardner put up $50,000 to sponsor a “Come Alive” media blitz targeting the black community for the weekend of October 5. Over that weekend alone, some 60,000 registrations were made, principally in the black community and mainly independent of the regular party apparatus. Overall 160,000 new voters were registered, of whom 120,000 were black.

Daley “The Son”

Richard Daley’s candidacy brought panic to Byrne’s camp and smiles of hope to Washington supporters. Daley had a number of credits which enhanced his viability.

1. He had his father’s name and his mother’s blessings. “Sis” Daley is the machine matriarch who has carefully guarded the Daley legacy to be bestowed upon her sons.

2. He appeared to have had sufficient support within the party to make winning against Byrne a realistic prospect.

3. Political elites throughout the city owe their careers to Richard J. Daley.

4. He had a significant political base within the black community among the old generation of business and professional people and the clergy who remembered Richard J. Daley, “the Father,” and saw “the Son” as one who would have influence among their constituencies.

5. Daley was expected to pick up substantial support among the “Lakefront liberals,” city union workers, and many employees who were perceived as having “nowhere else to go” given the hostility directed to Byrne.

Since Daley had to compete with Jane Byrne for white votes, and did not want to embarrass his liberal supporters or alienate his potential black support by attacking Harold Washington, he had to make a relentless attack on Byrne’s mayoral record before white audiences. He had to attack her without attacking the Democratic Party. He was not able to dislodge black support from Washington, nor to gain more than an even-split with Byrne among white voters.

If on the surface, most of Daley’s reform positions were shared with Washington, it only points to the fact that they both are liberal Democrats. In the Illinois General Assembly, Daley’s record matched Washington’s on most issues, i.e., the fight against the consumer sales tax, the fight for mental health and nursing home reforms, ERA, prenatal health care, expense of day care centers, equal pay for equal work, medical and mental care for rape victims, and child abuse–child support legislation.

Daley had taken strong administrative initiatives on issues relating to women, and in pro-
motion of women to positions of responsibility. This enabled him to gain endorsements of leading liberal feminists such as Dawn Clark Netsch, a State Representative who emerged as his campaign manager. However, he did not gain much support among women’s organizations. They differed on the issue of patronage. Washington moved from a soft position on patronage reform to a hard position in opposition to it, while Daley was locked into a white ethnic base primarily among white trade union workers and city employees on the Southwest Side and part of the North Side of the city. His strong stand against street violence (as opposed to organized crime) had earned him the enmity of the black and Latino street gangs. Some eventually became paid, active supporters of Byrne. After failing to get money from the Washington campaign, the El Rukns cut a deal with the machine leadership which netted as much as $70,000 for “polling” assistance. The outcome of the primary election indicated a rejection of both the gangs and Daley by the black electorate.

Washington received 36.3 percent of the 1.3 million votes, Jane Byrne 33.4 percent and Richard Daley 30 percent. Washington took 80 percent of the black vote, Byrne 14 percent, and Daley 6 percent. Byrne and Daley split 88 percent of the white vote, while Washington received 10 percent. The Latino vote went mainly to Daley, 52 percent, while Washington received 24 percent—a percentage that would dramatically shift in the general election. Eighty-four percent of Washington’s support came from black voters, 10 percent from whites, and 6 percent from Latinos.

The overwhelming support for Washington among blacks is most significant. In eleven wards with high concentration of black voters—ranging from 91.8 percent to 99 percent black—Harold Washington won 77.7 percent of the 276,678 Democratic votes cast. By contrast, in seven white wards, Washington won only 0.94 percent of the Democratic votes cast—2,131 of 227,327 votes.

The National Party and Realignment

The national Democratic Party, sensing an upsurge in electoral participation among blacks and working people throughout the country, saw in the Washington victory the first step in Reagan’s defeat in 1984—a rebuilding or reconstitution of the Democratic coalition. Therefore, recognizing the importance of black voter strength, Democratic party leaders, candidates, and officeholders put Chicago on their calendars and made it known that they would support Washington in “any way he desired.” This comment was echoed by the early presidential frontrunners. The venerable Claude Pepper (D-Florida), a leader of the senior citizens lobby in Congress, was brought in to target the white ethnic vote among the aged. Bert Lance of the Georgia State Democratic Party endorsed Harold Washington amidst a great deal of publicity and led a delegation of southern state party chairs to Chicago. Democratic fundraisers were held by black and white party insiders across the country, notably in New York, Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles. There would be some degree of reciprocity involved.
The Congressional Black Caucus and the Southern Strategy

The Congressional Black Caucus represents the formalized political center of the black elite in the US. Since 1980, Washington had been one of its newest but most vocal and progressive members in Congress. But it was only during the later stages of the primary, beginning with the TV debates (in which Washington made the best showing) that the Black Caucus began to view the Washington bid for mayor as a serious one. At this time Caucus members leaned on the national Democratic Party to support Washington if the Democrats were to have any hope of winning in 1984. They were particularly incensed with, but not surprised by, Kennedy's endorsement of Byrne in the primary. However, they reserved their sharpest criticism for presidential hopeful Walter Mondale who endorsed Richard Daley—in a miscalculated under-assessment of the level of local black unity operative in the Washington campaign and an overassessment of Daley's support in the regular Democratic Party.

John Conyers (D-Michigan) spent nearly three weeks in Chicago and brought in his leading organizers to head up the Election Day apparatus for Washington during both the primary and the general election. Other members of the Caucus raised money for his candidacy. While over 95 percent of his $1.3 million in primary funds was raised locally, over 25 percent of the $3 million raised for Washington during the general election period was from national sources—with Black Caucus individuals serving as conduits for a large percentage of these monies. This is, in part, substantiation for the observation that the Washington campaign had been "nationalized" and taken on as an agenda item of the national black political elite.7

The success of the Washington campaign has led to a significant stimulation of interest in local elections across the country. Clearly, the international, and certainly, the national media attention generated by the Chicago mayoral election has had a major, perhaps enduring impact upon the level of black political participation and the nature of local electoral coalitions. This certainly was the case in Philadelphia, where Wilson Goode withstood the challenge of Frank Rizzo, the arch-villain of the Philadelphia black movement of the late '60s and '70s. It also had a positive contributive effect upon local elections in Boston and Baltimore, where strong black electoral challenges were being waged. It is too early to foretell what the full ramifications of the Washington campaign success will be on the unfolding alignment of race, nationality, and class forces. A part of it will have to do with the outcome of the benchmarks and limitations of Washington's reform administration in its practice, as well as the practice of progressive and radicalized sectors of the Chicago movement scene.

In Chicago, Washington had won the primary without the support of the regular Democratic Party organization. It appeared that he would have to win the general election without broad party support. Should he lose, the Democratic Party would have blown an excellent opportunity to consolidate on a new basis. Should he win, without the party support, there would be no basis for a rapprochement. From this standpoint, national Democratic leaders had nothing to gain and everything to lose by not supporting Washington. In supporting him, they had an opportunity to rebuild on the basis of an upsurge in mass participation among blacks and other dissatisfied segments of the electorate in an all-out effort to defeat Reagan.
The Black Caucus understood this and it became easy for them to influence white Democratic leaders of the national party to put Chicago on their itinerary. And thus, a succession of Democratic politicians and hopeful candidates were paraded through Chicago to convince white Democrats to do what blacks had done for 50 years: support Democratic candidates.

Local Realignment and Intra-Party Struggle

Initially, the white Democratic Party leadership was paralyzed. The primary upset had left them in search of a political center around which they could rally. While a few of the most staunch reactionaries bolted the party and cast their support to Epton, weeks went by before Byrne attempted a short-lived "write-in" candidacy. It fizzled. With only four weeks to go before the general election, a wave of white aldermen and ward committeemen bolted the party. They openly or privately worked for the liberal but little-known Republican, Bernard Epton, who under ordinary circumstances would have been crushed at the polls by a united party organization and a decidedly Democratic electorate. Perhaps it was the early indecisiveness among the regular organization leadership that prevented a united effort to increase white ethnic ward voter registration in the first weeks after Washington's primary upset. Such a campaign could have generated sufficient new voters for Epton to claim a nominal victory and for the machine to retain control over the mayor's office.

"Fast" Eddie Vrydolyak, the party chair, must be singled out as the center of the racist reaction to the Washington campaign. During the last weekend before the primary election, he made the clearest statement of the central issue of the campaign: racial power. In arguing before Northwest side party workers, Vrydolyak argued that the party should close ranks behind Byrne and abandon Daley, for a vote for Daley was a vote for Washington. "After all, it's a race thing," he said.

After the primary, Vrydolyak procrastinated and he convened the party central committee only after the national Democratic Party leadership made it clear that Byrne's write-in bid was to cease and the local party leadership should close ranks behind Harold Washington. This gesture of support came a full month into the seven-week-long general election period. Vrydolyak is the leader of the current bloc of "29" aldermen in opposition to Washington's reform-in-government program. This group has been labeled as part of the "Cabal-ocrats"—Republicans masquerading as "Democrats" within the party.

Election Day Voter Turnout

Nearly 1.3 million people, 82 percent of the eligible voters, voted on April 12. Washington received 50.06 percent (668,176) of the votes while Epton received 619,926 votes or 46.4 percent. The mobilization of the electorate along racial and nationality lines (white ethnics included) made this one of the closest local elections in the history of machine politics in Chicago. Washington carried twenty-three wards, two more than he carried in the primary election. Epton carried twenty-seven wards on the strength of the white ethnic backlash and a mass bolt from the fifty-year tradition of Democratic hegemony at the polls.
While Epton carried 86 percent of the vote in predominantly white wards, (compared with 12 percent for Harold Washington), Washington garnered 98 percent of the vote in predominantly black wards. In the traditionally liberal "Lake Front" white wards (usually carried by Democratic candidates) Epton carried 72 percent of the vote, outpolling Washington (24 percent) nearly 3 to 1. When we consider that the Lake Front wards are more racially heterogeneous, and given the pattern of black and Latino voting (9 to 1 and 3 to 1 respectively for Washington over Epton), it is not difficult to argue that Washington received an even lower percentage of the white vote within the precincts.

If the Latino vote (discussed below) were held constant, our data indicate that the general election was even more racially polarized than the vote in the primary. In the primary returns, the leading white candidates received an estimated 88 percent of the total white vote and 21 percent of the total black vote. However, in the general returns, Epton captured 95 percent of the total white vote but only 2 percent of the black vote.

If racial bloc voting was the defining characteristic of the electorate in the primary, then voting along nationality lines was a characteristic feature of the general election vote. The single most important aspect of the nationality vote was the dramatic shift in support among Latinos for Harold Washington.

The Latino Turnout and Nationality in the General Election

Although Washington received 74 percent of the vote in wards that are numerically dominated by Latinos, the Latino vote varied markedly along nationality lines. Puerto Ricans and Mexicans gave Washington 79 percent and 68 percent respectively while the more conservative, but smaller, Cuban electorate gave Washington only 52 percent of their total voter turnout.

The outstanding features of the Latino impact on the 1983 mayoral election are: (1) a near 20 percent increase in the Latino registrations, (2) the increase in Latino turnout, and (3) the dramatic increase in the vote for Washington between the primary and the general election. In the general election, in each ward, Washington received at least a 126 percent increase in support over the primary.

What explains this dramatic Latino turnabout? Washington made a major effort to attract the Latino vote. Latinos were put into positions of visibility and responsibility within the campaign. Washington targeted his program and campaign literature to address the needs and aspirations of the Latino population, and presented major campaign publications in Spanish. Also, the Washington campaign underwrote a newspaper project, El Independiente, a "secret weapon" that targeted the Spanish-speaking communities of Chicago. At least three issues were printed. In addition, a Latino "Blue Button" was also produced and distributed.

The Governance Period

The first months of the Washington administration have been akin to war. In typical Chicago fashion, Rudy Luzano, a Hispanic labor leader, and staunch supporter of Washington, was murdered after the general election. In the past two elections since Daley's death, the reconciliation of the Democratic Party has been marred by the negotiation of deals that prevented black leaders from attaining a greater semblance of power and privilege within the Democratic Party. Such deals have not happened this time, since the party bosses had not supported Washington and in many instances actively opposed his election. Washington had called for a unity breakfast after his primary and general elections victories and many principals in the losing camps did not attend. At the inaugural, Washington broke with precedent—a City Council chamber ceremony which could only be attended by 300-400 and held an open ceremony at Navy Pier attended by several thousands. During Washington's speech he reassured his promise of reform government, elimination of machine patronage, and open government without burdening the electorate with mismanagement, unfairness, and inequality.

While Washington attacked the past practices of the machine, he also promised fiscal restraint and stability in government, and sound business practices. Thus, an olive branch
was being extended to the corporate despite its lack of support in his primary and general election bids. In his Transition Team, Washington dispelled any notions of that a "black take-over" was imminent by appointing a majority of whites. While more blacks were appointed to a government Transition Team than at any time in the city’s history, the most significant aspect of the policymaking structure of the early Washington governance collective is its overwhelming composition drawn from business and professional elites and political insiders.

The further working out of the economic (class) contradictions at the center of issues of urban governance has been overshadowed by the persistence, even intensification, of a virulent strain of racist reaction. A major theme in the early Washington administration has been the confrontation between black power and the Chicago "white power" structure. At the heart of the current struggle between the Vrydolyak 29 in City Council and the Washington 21 is the continuation of the struggle of black power vs. white corporate America. This scenario tells us as much about the limitations of reformist electoral black power strategy as it reveals its inability to provide a fundamental redistribution of social resources. All the "29" are white alderpersons and tend to be ward committee-men, and the Washington 21 is composed of black alderpersons and white independents with liberal or predominantly black constituencies. Beyond these distinctions, past all the hype surrounding the struggle to institute reforms which target the machine, there are few substantive bases for unity. Thus, on many class-based issues we can expect fragmentation within both camps along the lines of material incentives and resource redistribution.

Conclusion and Implications

In general, we have attempted to base this analysis on the objective development of the historical forces that led to the campaign, and the social character of the campaign itself. Indeed, this campaign will be discussed as a permanent event in black political history, and the history of Chicago. Our contribution in this paper is to provide the essential facts in an organized manner. Further, we believe this campaign should be studied to understand several major points:

1. Black adults demonstrated that under specific conditions they will defy all expectations and mobilize at unprecedented levels. These conditions are unity of black leadership, public attacks from white racism, and a legitimate form of mobilization such as voting.

2. Racism, nationality, and class dynamics were operative factors explaining the Harold Washington election and fueling the dialectical, political process of unity building over all three stages of the mayoral politics process that moved a black into City Hall in 1983.

3. There was a dynamic tension between coalition development on the inside of the political structure and coalition development among movement forces using resources outside the system.

4. During the first two stages, clearly the movement forces had the ascendancy (concrete struggles and community issues, boycott of Chicago Fest, mass voter registration, the formation of the Task Force, etc.). During the general election, a tedious balance was struck between the movement forces which sustained the mobilization and a transition apparatus which clearly was composed of elements whose main base and orientation was from within system structures. During the governance phase we see a decided trend, beneath all the public calamity and rhetoric emitting from the conflict between the "Vrydolyak 29" and "Washington 21" in City Council that the movement forces are taking their lead from City Hall rather than defining the context of struggle and the terrain of battle.

5. At this point, the most progressive aspect of the current struggle has been the movement of the struggle into the wards in an attempt by populist-reformists to unseat ward committee-
men and old guard politicians in the March primaries that open the presidential electoral season in Illinois. Other efforts to establish and consolidate independent bases of power and movement resources have been feeble to this point.

In Chicago, decades of electoral political participation on the part of the black community, its political leadership, and movement activists, have resulted in some substantial political gains. Relative proportional representation in the City Council, substantial representation on major political boards and commissions, and a black man occupying the “Fifth Floor” of City Hall were merely fantastic visions in the previous decade. In Chicago, blacks had historically exhausted the limitations of the symbolic representation offered them by the Republican Party, the decades of struggle within the Democratic machine produced substantial gains and the emergence of the black electorate as the pivotal force in city politics. The Washington mayoral victory and the subsequent power struggle within government and the later treachery of the Democratic Party elite have brought blacks, progressive whites, and a growing Latino electorate to a critical threshold of political action and to the brink of a decisive break with the Democratic Party.

Some Concluding Comments

This analysis has demonstrated the vitality and viability of the black liberation movement, specifically an instance of struggle in the electoral arena. The election of Harold Washington, a reformed machine politician, was the result of a crusade in the black community. A network of militant organizations had been developing from the late 1970s and early 1980s, and the spontaneous mass movement was led by these forces. The fundamental conditions for this electoral victory include successful mobilization of masses of people, a broad consensus of political focus, and a united leadership.

Of course, these are the factors internal to the movement. The victory was also possible because a change in the structure of political opportunity beginning with Mayor Daley’s death and ending with a split white vote in the Democratic primary in 1983. These many special conditions have led to the discussion of whether Washington will be one-term mayor or not. The main swing factor is whether white liberals can get more whites to vote for political reform led by black people. If white people don’t support Washington in increasing numbers, racial hostility is likely to be at unprecedented levels by the time of the next
mayoral campaign.

There is also another issue of great importance: Can Jess run like Harold? In states like South Carolina, Virginia, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia, and in cities like Chicago, New York, Detroit, and Los Angeles, the answer is likely to be yes. Here, the white candidates split the white vote, and Jesse pulled most of the Black vote. The main thing is that the race issues are definitive in those areas, and up to this point the structure of political opportunity has been virtually closed. The critical question is whether the long-term result will strengthen the Democratic Party or the movement. For the political efforts of Harold Washington and Jesse Jackson, the results should be in over the next three years. The big question is how long will the cathartic ritual of voting black satisfy the hunger of black people for freedom, since the material benefits of black elected officials are so limited?

FOOTNOTES


5. It was widely projected that this high turnout in the November 2 general election represented the resurgence of the Cook County Regular Democratic Party by Chairman Edward Vrdolyak rather than an independent upsurge based in the Black community. See “Huge Voter Turnout Enhances (Washington) Mayoral Bid,” Chicago Defender, November 4, 1982; also the summary analysis articles of the effects of the gubernatorial turnout on the mayoral race in the Sun Times and Tribune, November 3–4, 1982.

6. Given the policy of reciprocity, since his election, Washington has spent considerable time on the road campaigning for local black electoral bids across the country as part of the “payoff” to the NBPE, first and foremost, and to the national Democratic Party in its electoral push for the 1984 presidential election.

7. For background on Edward Vrdolyak, see the pamphlet Stop Fast Eddie, available from Timbuktu Books (P.O. Box 7696, Chicago, IL 60680).


9. We have continued to collect information on the Washington election and his subsequent administration. Included in this material is a regular, ongoing, newslipping project. Moreover, we have continued to monitor Chicago politics and the social protest movement in order to provide the basis for a continuous assessment of Chicago political dynamics as they unfold.

Abdul Alkalimat is active in the black liberation movement and is presently teaching in the Afro-American Studies and Research Program at the University of Illinois. Don Gills is a PhD candidate in Political Science at Northwestern University. Both are active in People’s College, an organization involved in struggles for African liberation, community, housing, and the current battle for a new politics in Chicago.
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