



Why Massachusetts Has The Blues

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By Stephen Adams

Why are so many Massachusetts residents despondent over the reelection of President Bush? I think it goes deeper than the specifics of policy differences between the Republican and Democratic candidates. President Bush's inaugural address may help explain a lot of the angst that lingers here long after the election.

While the president spoke of "four decades defined by the swiftest advance of freedom ever seen," the political tide in Massachusetts has tended toward limiting liberty in favor of government-centered policies. But even in Massachusetts, there is evidence that the tide may be turning, and for some this is unsettling.

I am not suggesting that the people who make Massachusetts one of the blue states don't believe in individual freedom and responsibility. I think they agree with much of what the President espoused. Who can argue with economic independence, homeownership, high standards in education, concern for our neighbors and respect for all, even the unwanted?

But it's a matter of trust. President Bush Thursday directed his comments to heads of state, but could have been speaking to many in Massachusetts when he said, "To serve your people you must learn to trust them." And there's the rub. Many Massachusetts blues just do not trust their fellow citizens to make good choices for themselves.

Many of the policy debates underway in Massachusetts reveal a battle between individual freedom and responsibility on one hand, and government-centered decision making on the other. While the big-government side is not going away any time soon, there are clear signs that liberty may be making headway here in the Commonwealth.

- ?? Health care. The push towards government provision of health care for all will relieve individuals of responsibility for the cost of their health care services and the lifestyle choices that affect their need for health care. But both the Republican Governor and Democratic Senate President are calling for market-based solutions to expanding health care, not more government mandates or tax-funded increases.
- ?? Auto insurance. Good drivers in Massachusetts are paying very high auto insurance rates to hold down the costs for higher-risk drivers. This system, unique in the nation, has shielded high-risk drivers from their behavior. Today, the state is close to reforming the system so that insurance rates more accurately reflect individual risk factors.
- ?? Affordable housing. Too many still look to state spending to solve the affordable housing problem. But it is becoming clear to a growing number of lawmakers that exclusionary local rules are unreasonably limiting the production of moderately-priced homes and that the market needs to be freed up to provide the range of products home buyers seek.
- ?? Public education. This best demonstrates the failure of the government-knows-best philosophy. Yet, sadly, it is here that the signs of progress are weakest in Massachusetts. A well-educated citizenry is the most crucial ingredient to self-government. Yet, Massachusetts continues to tolerate a stubborn resistance to improving public education, particularly for children in low- and moderate-income families.

After a decade of educational reforms and increased spending, more than half of the students in the state's five largest school systems failed the eighth-grade science and technology MCAS test last spring. In Holyoke, an astounding sixty-nine percent failed.

Meanwhile, Pioneer Institute surveys reveal that parents of modest means know the difference between good and bad schools and would prefer better schools if they had a choice. Pilot schools, charter schools and METCO participants have proven that freedom to choose will cause disadvantaged families to provide better education for their children.

Still, Massachusetts insists on sharply limiting parental choice in public education. As a result, local governments relegate children from families of modest means to largely failing public schools.

So why are so many here afraid to trust people with more liberty? Perhaps it is because they fear their fellow citizens are not up to the task. The president acknowledged that people needed to be prepared "for the challenges of living in a free society."

However you feel about President Bush, it's hard to argue with the observation that we Americans--even we in Massachusetts--are bound to one another in the cause of freedom. The lesson to the Massachusetts blues from President Bush's inaugural address is that we will make greater progress toward our shared goals if we rely more on our fellow citizens to make good choices for themselves and their families and less on government to make those choices for them.

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