Taking History to Heart

THE POWER OF THE PAST

IN BUILDING SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

JAMES GREEN

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Bringing movement politics to voters: Mel King campaigning for mayor in the South End of Boston. *Photograph © Richard Sobol.*

CHAPTER **8**

Why Movement History Matters: The Politics of Class and Race in Boston

In March 1972 a group of black parents with children in the Boston public schools sued the city's school committee for deliberately segregating their children from white students. The plaintiffs could not challenge southern-style segregation statutes, but their attorneys found a clear record of the school committee's resistance to desegregation. Committee members overtly defied the desegregation guidelines laid out in the state's Racial Imbalance Act—a law enacted in 1965 in response to school boycotts organized by the civil rights movement. Ironically, Massachusetts had been through all this before when the legislature, influenced by the abolitionist movement, abolished mandated school segregation. This effort overrode the historic separate-but-equal decision rendered by the courts in the noted Roberts case of 1850.[1]

The Busing

A century and a quarter later, the drama was replayed. And on 21 June 1974 Federal Judge Arthur W. Garrity concluded that the defendants, the elected school committee responsible for the Boston public schools, had "knowingly carried out a systematic program of segregation affecting all of the city's students, teachers and school facilities and have intentionally brought about and maintained a dual school system." Therefore, he ruled, "the entire school system is unconstitutionally segregated."[2] Garrity then issued a controversial desegregation order requiring crosstown busing of children between Boston's highly segregated neighborhoods. When the plan was implemented on September 12, the day began quietly at eighty schools, but violence erupted in South Boston, where crowds chanted "Niggers, go home" and then stoned afternoon buses carrying black children. The battle of Boston had begun. It would become

a world news story, creating media images as memorable as those of whites protesting school desegregation at Little Rock Central High School in 1957.

In a city gripped with the fear of race war, black parents, and their white supporters, mobilized to defend their children while some white residents boycotted the desegregated schools and joined neighborhood organizations dedicated to resisting the court order. When a Haitian immigrant was nearly beaten to death by whites in South Boston on October 7, rioting erupted in Roxbury and the governor called out the National Guard. Racist graffiti appeared everywhere in the Athens of America. Judge Garrity was burned in effigy on the Boston Common, where on the old bandstand a poster was hung that read:

THE CITY IS OCCUPIED
A BOYCOTT EXISTS
A TYRANT REIGNS
LAW IS BY DECREE

The conflict over busing in Boston provoked a wave of doubt on the part of liberals who had strongly supported the civil rights movement's crusade to desegregate the South. Though opposed to school segregation, these critics blamed Judge Garrity's order for placing an unfair burden on the city's working-class whites, who had their own history of oppression. The Boston journalist Alan Lupo, who wrote the first book about busing in 1977, concluded that the "city was imprisoned by its own history." Its people had failed to learn from that history, had failed to learn about the oppression of white working people of immigrant origins who were now held solely responsible for race discrimination. After he observed a tense standoff between white protestors and the police trying to protect black children in school buses, Lupo wrote with bitter irony of this confrontation between Boston's community of color and its white Catholic community. And where, he asked, were the Yankees, "the ones who brought the slaves and who fought on both sides of the issue of freedom and equality, the ones who enticed immigrants and then spat on them"? They were nowhere to be seen that day. They were safe in the suburbs having left a dubious legacy to those who inherited their Boston.[3]

When some white parents took their kids out of the schools and others left the city in what was called "white flight," observers like Lupo saw their worst fears confirmed. In a later edition of his book on busing, he complained that the integrated school system had not delivered improved quality. A decade after the court order, the school system had changed from 70 percent white to 70 percent children of color, with parents voicing numerous complaints. There was confusion over school assignments, there was poor leadership and "increased criminal violence by blacks, replacing the white and black violence that marked the early years of busing." There was a perception that "an already failing system was getting worse."[4]

Lupo's reading of history was shared by other critics of busing, and it reflected a growing disillusionment with the protests of the sixties and the policies they had created.[5] The far right was on the offensive, attacking all forms of affirmative action against racism, and neoliberals were bemoaning the unintended consequences of reforms intended to promote equality. No redemption could be found in the history of Boston's desegregation struggle, only consternation.

Common Ground

This regretful reading of history received powerful sanction in 1985 with the publication of J. Anthony Lukas's enormously influential book *Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families*.[6] I eagerly awaited its publication, having followed its progress through the long years of research when Tony Lukas interviewed scores of participants, even some of us who had been involved in *Radical America*'s editorial statement on the history and politics of the desegregation struggle, described in chapter 1. As a famous *New York Times* writer, Lukas had been sympathetic to the student and antiwar movements. He was one of that generation of liberal journalists who zealously questioned official versions of the truth and the phony objectivity the media projected. Furthermore, unlike most liberals, he seemed very concerned with the problem of class, which he called the "dirty secret in American life."[7] Like most everyone who read *Common Ground*, I was engrossed in the dramatic ways Lukas used social history and oral history in telling his saga.

Common Ground earned rave reviews and received the Pulitzer prize. It was, said rapturous reviewers, the "riveting stuff of genuine tragedy," which read like a novel and at the same time, offered "a dispassionate reconstruction of events." A "model of thoroughness and balance," it would be the last word on Boston's busing ordeal.[8]

I found the book moving and disturbing at the same time. As a student and teacher of Boston history, I was awed by Lukas's skill in making the past come alive, but as an observer and participant in the antiracist struggles of the time, I was offended that he devoted only a few paragraphs to the racial violence that had frightened and hurt so many people in Boston during the fall of 1974. Even more worrisome was the writer's conclusion that "the price" of busing wasn't worth paying.[9] He painted a picture of a struggle that "originated in righteous claims, but degenerated into a grotesque convulsion that benefitted no one," in the words of one of the few critical reviews.[10] My feelings were shared by others in the activist community, and they were magnified when we saw how important the book became as a definitive history. Not only was *Common Ground* being taught in the nation's education schools, it was being widely quoted by liberal politicians and policy makers disillusioned with racially divisive policies that seemed to be splitting the Democratic Party and driving angry white working men into the Republican Party of President Ronald Reagan.[11]

Lukas's doubts about the price to be paid for school desegregation arose out of his class analysis of the conflict. The legal struggle over school segregation waged in Judge Arthur Garrity's federal courtroom "often resembled an Irish morality play, fought out between various conceptions of what it meant to be Irish in contemporary Boston. It was a family feud." On one side were "the two-toilet Irish"—Judge Garrity, Mayor Kevin White, Senator Edward Kennedy, and their WASP allies in the *Boston Globe* and the suburbs. On the other side were the "little people" in the white neighborhoods who felt betrayed by "their own"—the same working people who abandoned the Kennedy Democrats and joined the Reagan Republicans. It wasn't necessary to emphasize the racism of the white folks who opposed busing, Lukas wrote, because "class resentment did more than anything to feed the fires of white resistance in the inner-city neighborhoods."[12]

I decided to write about *Common Ground* after a moving conversation with Ruth Batson, a pioneer of the civil rights struggle who headed Boston's Museum of African American History. She was deeply disturbed by Lukas's book. "Look at what he's done to our history," she said. "He's left our movement out of his story, left out the struggle that was carried out for so many years by black people in Boston." As she later told a *Globe* columnist, she feared the book would "forever distort" the history of desegregation in the city.[13]

What, I wanted to know, would that history read like with the movement put back in? I already knew many episodes of the movement story from activists I had interviewed or spoken with informally. I also had read several chapters of it in a remarkable book produced by Boston's most important community activist and civil rights leader, Mel King. His personal history of social change in the city was produced by Boston's movement-inspired South End Press in 1981, but his book *Chain of Change* never reached the kind of audience Tony Lukas's reached.[14] What, I wondered, would the story look like if conveyed through the movement eyes of Mel King?

Mel King found no place in *Common Ground,* which featured portraits of five white leaders, including Mayor Kevin H. White, Judge Garrity, Humberto Cardinal Medeiros, *Boston Globe* editor Thomas Winship and the anti-busing city councilor from South Boston, Louise Day Hicks. Lukas presents Mrs. Hicks as an opportunist "who didn't really have anything against black people." Staunch for labor and the Democratic Party, "[h]er invective focused on 'the special interests,' 'the Establishment,' 'the outside power structure,' 'the rich people in the suburbs,' 'the forces who attempt to invade us.' . . . You know where I stand," she told her supporters, who knew she stood for the racial status quo. "Boston for the Bostonians," she proclaimed, aiming her anger at suburban elites who issued court orders and published liberal newspapers. Lukas claimed that "[b]y Bostonians she meant 'the workingman and woman, the rent payer, the home owner, the law-abiding, tax-paying, decent-living, hard-working forgotten American.' "[15] But black Bostonians felt excluded from Hicks's Boston, restricted to their neighborhoods, their low wage jobs, and their segregated schools. Lukas included no portraits of African American leaders who had shaped the desegregation struggle, the court order, and the community response: movement actors like Ruth Batson and Mel King, who is briefly mentioned by Lukas as someone whites found "an unnerving figure."[16]

Mel King

I came to know Mel King when I lived in the South End of Boston, a diverse area of working-class homeowners and lodgers. In 1972 he had been elected to represent the district in the state legislature. It was easy to be sucked into the winds of protest that blew through this storm center of poor people's struggles against urban renewal. King was usually at the center of the storm in this neighborhood that helped make Boston a "contested city."[17] I worked with a group fighting the conversion of lodging houses into luxury apartments and in the process began to collect oral histories with neighborhood residents and activists who told me about the neighborhood's multiethnic, live-and-let-live tradition.[18] South End schools were already quite diverse so court-ordered busing aroused no opposition there in contrast to the militant white resistance that emerged in a few white areas.[19]

King grew up in the South End's dense New York Streets area, the child of West Indian immigrants. In the 1950s he would see the neighborhood targeted for destruction by the bulldozers of urban renewal, like the old West End and other "urban villages" that awaited a similar fate. He attended the Abraham Lincoln School made famous in Mary Antin's novel of immigrant success, *The Promised Land.* The school was "a little United Nations," King recalled, one of the few racially integrated schools in Boston. He went to a black college in South Carolina, and when he came home one summer was thrilled to hear Paul Robeson speak. The man's bearing and his vision inspired the young King, made him "ready for the work to come." After college he returned home to earn a master's degree in teaching, and then when he tried to teach in Boston, he encountered "the fantastic and fanatical racism" that black people faced in the public schools. At the same time, he suffered from overt discrimination while seeking housing for his family. These experiences set him on a determined course to combat racism in Boston, a city that arrogantly proclaimed itself enlightened when it came to race relations.[20]

The Black Education Movement

Seeing the history of the black education movement in Boston through the activities of Mel King puts the "tragedy" of busing and the city's racial conflict in the context of movement history; it also puts the consequences of desegregation in a different light than the one Anthony Lukas shed on the story. During the

1960s, Boston's highly segregated schools and neighborhoods became targets of 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. The courts found the BHA guilty. The public schools suffered from neglect by the city's business leaders and from the retrograde and blatantly racist practices of politicians who maintained control of the school committee and school department.[21] In 1960 Citizens for Boston Public Schools (CBPS) formed to protest these conditions, and a year later, it endorsed four candidates for school committee. The two whites won and the two blacks lost; one of the latter was Mel King.

In 1962 the Northern Student Movement, initiated to support civil rights struggles in the South, joined some black churches to set up tutorial programs for black children in inner-city schools. In the same year, the CBPS, the NAACP, and CORE all published reports critical of 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. Roughly nine thousand students (about one-quarter of the student body) participated in the Stay Out campaign of 1963 while 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 racial 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.[22]

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 reelection as a defender of segregation and the "neighborhood school." Indeed, Hicks "identified herself as the budding symbol of northern intransigence toward civil rights demands," according to Peter Schrag, author of the revealing book *Village School Downtown*. She also identified herself with Mayor James Michael Curley's populist legacy and against Boston's blue-blooded WASP establishment. She campaigned "on behalf of small people who never expect to make it big." Hicks led all candidates in the 1963 election. Mel King failed to come close in his second bid for the school committee.[23]

During the mid-sixties, civil rights protests in Boston included parent boycotts, student strikes, speaking out at school committee hearings, picket lines, marches, and the creation of "freedom schools," including one at the 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 mandated school desegregation but prohibited busing as a solution. After a brief lull, boycotts continued, notably at the Gibson School described by Jonathan Kozol in his famous book, *Death at an Early Age*.

A new phase of the struggle began. Black activists now demanded "community-controlled education" and created voluntary plans to bus black children to suburbs and to open private schools in Roxbury. But at the same time, the black education movement continued to challenge the school committee, encouraged by the statewide law aimed at improving the racial balance in schools. Movement leaders accused Louise Day Hicks of using the "fear-laden issues of busing and race for her own political advantage," to ensure her reelection to the school committee in 1965. Hicks again topped the field, but Mel King won far more support than he had previously in his bid for office, finishing sixth in the race for five seats on the committee. The black community was becoming highly politicized. For the first time in the city's history, a greater percentage of black voters than white voters went to the polls in the primary election.[24]

In 1967 Mel King became director of the New Urban League, which hoped to promote further organizational development in Boston's black community. Louise Day Hicks decided to campaign for mayor on her segregationist record. Her candidacy threatened the new image of Boston promoted by former mayors Collins and Hynes and their allies in the downtown business and banking establishments.[25] City elites were relieved to see the emergence of a more acceptable liberal candidate, Kevin Hagan White of West Roxbury. A Williams College graduate, and a new type of Irish politician, he appealed to the successful professional classes more than to the working-class folks in neighborhoods like South Boston, Louise Hicks's "hometown." White campaigned against Hicks as a Kennedy liberal who would restore racial peace. He sought support from black voters and presented himself simultaneously as a reformer, like New York City's glamorous mayor John Lindsay, as well as progrowth leader who would continue plans for the New Boston. After an intense, bitter campaign, White beat Hicks by less than five thousand votes. He won because he received over fifteen thousand black votes. A registration drive and a push to get out the vote had led to an unprecedented 68 percent turnout among blacks. In the same election Thomas Atkins became the first African American elected to an at-large city-council seat.[26]

As mayor, Kevin White began to build a patronage machine modeled after Richard Daley's organization in Chicago. It included an important arm in the black community.[27] To Mel King, the incorporation of black loyalists into the mayor's administration represented a continuation of the "service stage" in African American political development, which involved "taking the white power structure's handouts rather than organizing the community to demand satisfaction of black needs." He believed that Mayor White wanted to prolong

this situation through traditional patronage arrangements, but that black political activists had come too far to return to a state of dependency on the Democratic Party and City Hall.[28] The protest movement against racism in the schools paralleled other community-based empowerment efforts, which, taken together, represented a new "organizing stage" that had begun to emerge in Boston's neighborhoods.

The Organizing Stage

Community groups immediately challenged the probusiness development policies of the White administration aimed at improving the downtown area, which was becoming a leading center for the concentration of capital. While City Hall fostered a "New Boston" for banks, businesses, hospitals, and private colleges, the neighborhoods remained poor and suffered from the conversion of affordable housing into "luxury housing."

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 livable buildings, displacing one hundred families. When CAUSE members blocked the parking lot, twenty-three were arrested, including Mel King. Protestors then encamped on the site. Their Tent City became a symbol of popular resistance to the city's probusiness housing policies.

Besides the problems of discrimination in schools and housing, people of color suffered from pervasive discrimination in the labor market. After decades of being restricted to low-paying service jobs, Boston's growing black population gradually began to secure employment in industry during the 1950s, but then the city's manufacturing shops began closing. The new hi-tech jobs that opened up in the suburbs remained off limits to people of color. Government employment, which provided opportunities for many blacks in large cities, remained virtually all white in Boston. Though some new job opportunities opened up for blacks between 1950 and 1970, their earning power remained relatively unchanged. After twenty years of "progress" they still earned two-thirds of what white workers received. Blacks had not experienced the occupational mobility of white ethnic groups, according to historian Stephan Thernstrom, because of systematic racial discrimination.[29]

The White Administration coincided with a period of prosperity. New jobs were created in downtown offices, in new stores, and in the city's numerous education and health care institutions, but these positions were occupied mainly by educated suburbanites. After suffering from the recession of the seventies, white construction workers hopped aboard the new gravy train created by Boston's building boom, but their success was not shared by inner-city residents of color excluded from the unionized construction industry. In 1968 the first black activists confronted the construction industry, forming the United Community Construction Workers (UCCW) to fight against discrimination by contractors and unions.

The assassination of Martin Luther King in April of 1968 led to angry protests in Boston's black neighborhoods. In the aftermath, activists created a Black Unified Front (BUF) which included many important groups, though not the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, whose leaders were apparently offended by the group's nationalist politics. The Front demanded 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. Frustrated with City Hall's determination to control development policies, Mel King and others laid the groundwork for the emergence of community development corporations in Boston's neighborhoods. This work quickly moved to what King called the "institution-building stage" when he and other urban planners secured funding for a state Community Development Finance Corporation.[30]

The movement for community-controlled development conflicted with Mayor White's desire to strengthen City Hall and his own organization in Boston's black neighborhoods where activists were moving toward independent political activity. In 1971 Boston's only black City Councillor, Thomas Atkins, decided to challenge Mayor White in the preliminary election. Atkins received a protest vote, but White won the votes of most people of color who guessed, correctly, that he would once again face Louise Day Hicks in the final runoff. After pushing very hard for Black and Latino registration, Kevin White won the election by a big margin. His victory did not depend on voters of color as it had in 1967. 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. Independent political leaders in the black community assumed that since White was now confident of African American electoral support, he would pay less attention to their concerns and more attention to the worries of white voters.[31] When Judge Garrity issued his school desegregation order in 1972, Mayor White hoped to avoid being caught in the middle of the conflict that would ensue.

The traumatic conflicts over court-ordered busing, described at the outset of this chapter, created a profound sense of crisis in the city. When the white attacks on school buses began, black people feared for their lives and many doubted if City Hall and the virtually all-white police force would protect them and their children. Given the enormous risks involved in desegregating the schools, Mel King and his allies wondered if they "were doing the right thing" by supporting busing. After all, many of them had emphasized the need for community-controlled schools with funding equal to what white neighborhood

schools received. Many leaders of the black education movement, doubting the possibility of equal treatment in the city of Boston, had focused their energies on busing some black children to quality schools in the suburbs in a community-controlled program called METCO.[32]

Mel King found his own dilemma resolved when he talked to a black student being bused to South Boston High School. "We have to go," she declared. "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 received a very practical education.[33] Ruth Batson expressed pride in the black children, and also the white children, who went through hell to attend desegregated schools. She saw the children not as victims, pawns in the game played by more powerful forces, but as heroes and heroines of their own story. "I thought that the kids who went through this were just wonderful kids. They weren't kids with great marks or anything. They were just kids who were determined. There was a movement. And they felt part of a movement."[34]

Even youngsters connected with the anti-busing movement were changed in unexpected ways. Tony Lukas wrote sensitively about one of the white students on the firing line, Lisa McGoff, a leader of the "Last White Class" at Charlestown High School. She was changed as a result of her experience. Unlike earlier graduates of the neighborhood high school, McGoff had gained an opportunity to meet and relate to people of color. Forced segregation had deprived earlier generations of that opportunity and that possibility for human growth. Lukas described her mother, Alice, as being agonized by her daughter's "seemingly irreconcilable emotions." For years Alice McGoff had crusaded against Judge Garrity's "judicial tyranny" with Charlestown's militant anti-busing group, Powder Keg. But even while fighting "forced busing," Alice McGoff "had watched with mounting admiration as Lisa assumed leadership at the school (which included peacemaking), managing through force of personality to restore some vestige of solidarity and tradition," Lukas wrote. "Her child was a determined young woman now, armed with the courage of her convictions. Some Powder Keg members might complain about Lisa's role at the school, suggesting she had somehow sold out to the 'pro-busers,' but Alice defended her, proclaiming a mother's pride."[35]

The busing was an intensely political experience for many people in Boston: for the black leaders and parents who rallied at Freedom House in Roxbury to maintain calm in the black community and to prepare children for what awaited them in desegregated schools and also for the white protestors who joined organizations like ROAR (Restore Our Alienated Rights) to resist what they saw as judicial tyranny. The conflict also produced a group of political leaders who would play leading roles in postbusing Boston. Ray Flynn, then a state representative from South Boston and strongly supported by ROAR, emerged as one of the leaders of the antibusing movement.

In 1975 Representative Flynn seemed interested in challenging the incumbent mayor White who had lost his support in many white areas where the resistance to busing was strongest and where people blamed City Hall for helping to implement the desegregation plan. White was defensive. He complained that he was "sharing too much of the busing burden."[36]

Flynn chose not run for mayor in 1975 and so ROAR lacked a strong candidate. In fact, it was the black education movement that produced viable candidates like State Senator Bill Owens, who had organized the antiracist rally in the fall of 1974. A Boston public school teacher and counselor named John O'Bryant, who had managed Mel King's campaigns for school committee, decided to make his own bid to become the first African American elected to the committee. He ran well in the preliminary and made the final list of candidates. After the primary, the newspaper of the South Boston Information Office carried a letter of warning: "Wake up Southie," it read. "Do you realize you gave 834 votes to John O'Bryant who is a pro-buser? . . ." The writer continued: "I was in the army with O'Bryant and believe me, he's not IRISH. He's a black man from Roxbury and believes in forced integration and Forced Busing." O'Bryant lost in the final election, but in the next election he succeeded, after struggling for nearly two decades to change the school system.[37]

O'Bryant became the first black person elected to the Boston School Committee in thirty-five years, while at the same time, Louise Day Hicks and John Kerrigan, two outspoken opponents of desegregation, lost bids for higher office. A year later, O'Bryant formed the Black Political Task Force to encourage further political participation. The desegregation struggle also brought along with it a movement to desegregate the work force, especially the lily-white staff of the Boston schools; it encouraged parents to hold schools more accountable to them and less to the patronage bosses; it forced other powerful institutions in the city to address the problems of public education.[38] Finally, the campaign against separate schools created possibilities, long denied, for white parents and children to get to know and even to cooperate with parents and children of color.

Other progressive developments flowed out of the busing crisis. Independent black politics gained momentum rapidly in the late 1970s as a new generation of black political activists came of age during what Mel King called the "organizing stage" of community development.

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

In 1975 White won reelection to a third term over a more conservative white politician who had alienated most blacks, but after the election the mayor had to cope with more discontent among African Americans. Boston had become a more dangerous city than ever before for people of color. Even after the stoning of school buses subsided, racist attacks continued. Black homes in white neighborhoods were attacked. In 1979 twelve black women were murdered in six months, provoking angry cries about a lack of concern by city and police officials. 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.

In 1979 Mel King decided to challenge Mayor White in the preliminary election. He charged that employment conditions for people of color had actually worsened in the private sector. The city added fifty thousand new jobs after 1970 but by the end of that decade, 65 percent of the new jobs belonged to suburban commuters. One federal government study showed that minorities were underrepresented in many clerical and sales jobs that required minimum training and few specialized skills, even though they were better educated than their counterparts in other cities. Mayor White took credit for a modest increase in minority representation in city jobs, but 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 stood aside during the bitter struggle of the United Community Construction Workers (UCCW) to apply "the Philadelphia Plan" for minority affirmative-action hiring in the construction industry, a fight that also ended up in the courts.

In 1979 Mel King and other community activists developed a Boston Jobs for Boston Residents program to address the employment needs of white men and women who lived in the city as well as the needs of workers of color. The program demanded that a minimum of 50 percent of the total work force, 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. King's negotiations with City Hall over the policy broke down—one of the many reasons he decided to take on Mayor White in the 1979 preliminary election for mayor. When King made the jobs residency policy an issue, White responded first with an executive order on minority hiring and then with an order establishing the hiring goals King had proposed.

King was also a key leader in the campaign for district representation that would allow for more school committee and city council representatives from communities of color. The Boston People's Organization, created by Mel and his supporters, took movement politics to the next stage and achieved a victory in 1982 with charter reforms that replaced at-large elections with district representation that, in turn, produced greater minority representation on the school committee.[39] This victory laid the groundwork for a breakthrough in independent political action, a unification of the city's many social movements into Mel King's Rainbow Coalition.

The Rainbow

The Rainbow Coalition developed a comprehensive agenda for community development through community empowerment. Its politics were infused with King's idea that urban politics needed to be about more than City Hall's distribution of resources. As his associate Marie Kennedy put it, this idea was based on the need to redistribute control over decision-making in city life.[40]

With the news that Kevin White would not run for reelection, the Rainbow Coalition decided to organize a campaign to elect Mel King mayor. King's preliminary campaign generated a new kind of excitement in Boston politics and a new sense of possibility in the progressive community. Hope was also engendered by the successful mayoral bid of Harold Washington in Chicago. Washington's campaign was based on community mobilization and organization against City Hall run by the old Daley patronage machine. It was also a campaign based on an effective multiracial, multiethnic coalition. When Mayor Washington came to Boston in midsummer to endorse King, the Rainbow 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.

After an enthusiastic grassroots campaign, King finished in a dead heat with the other top finisher, State Representative Ray Flynn of South Boston, an old foe in the battle over busing. King nearly doubled his percentage of the total vote he had received in his 1979 run for mayor. He swept the Black community with 90 percent of the vote, and he carried Asian and Latino precincts with big majorities. His campaign dramatically boosted voter registration in minority areas, where twenty-three thousand new voters registered in the three weeks after his preliminary victory. Besides this, King had galvanized many other liberal and radical groups with his idea of a Rainbow Coalition, a coming together of the various social protest movements that had surged through Boston for two decades.[41]

Ray Flynn maintained his anti-busing, anti-abortion stance and took no chances on alienating his core constituency, white voters whose resistance to school desegregation was strong. He refused to recognize Boston's racist past or to use the term *racism*. He insisted that the issues were economic not racial—the same in South Boston as in Roxbury. But Flynn also wanted to expand his base, to create a new coalition that would allow him to govern effectively if he was elected. He did not want to be seen as a single-issue anti-busing candidate. 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, and restrictions on the conversion of rental housing into condominiums. He presented himself as an urban populist supporting the neighborhoods against City Hall and downtown business interests.

The Mayoral Campaign of '83

The press loved comparing the two contestants who would square off in the final mayoral contest, "the craggy faced Irish battler from South Boston" and the "brawny, bald, bearded activist" from the South End. "The two men were the most left-ward 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.[42]

Each candidate still lived in the "rough Boston neighborhood where he was born and raised." Both men's fathers had worked on the Boston docks and both had attended public schools. Left unsaid was the fact that Mel King went to one of the city's few integrated schools, 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. While 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 Amtrak yards separated the wide-open, multiracial South End from the all-white, intensely parochial neighborhood Ray Flynn had represented in the State House.[43] *Time* magazine also ignored what distinguished the grassroots coalitions King and Flynn created. The core of each candidate's coalition took shape during the busing conflict that polarized the Hub in the mid-seventies, and in many ways the 1983 campaign was fought along some of the same battle lines drawn during the desegregation conflict.

Throughout the campaign King insisted that racism was still a political and social problem of the highest order. It was hurting white as well as black citizens. He reached out to white citizens and appealed to their best instincts. He often reminded leftists and militants in his campaign to treat people in white areas as potential allies, as "people the same as you and me." 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, used it to create a "hostile defensive mentality." He actively sought white supporters, but 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.[44]

A broad multiracial alliance of the new social movements born in the sixties and seventies gathered under King's rainbow. He linked the issues raised by these movements in what he called the "chain of change" and took what he humorously called "a whole left approach." This gave the Rainbow Coalition a decentralized, movement quality. The candidate 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. It was the first time since the antiwar demonstrations of the early 1970s that so many movement activists could come together in a common cause—to work together in a multicultural coalition that brought together a range of issues and offered a progressive program to an entire city.

The Real Problem

Flynn wanted the city to forget busing and racial conflict. He aimed to bring the city's neighborhoods together around "ground floor economic issues." "The real problem is economic discrimination," he said in an important TV debate. Although Flynn based his coalition on a traditional white anti-busing, anti-abortion constituency, he also attracted significant support from liberals and leftists who liked his economic populism and the opportunity his candidacy offered to capture City Hall for the people in Boston's working-class neighborhoods.[45]

Some of Flynn's supporters were movement activists, former student radicals who moved into white working-class areas like East Boston and Dorchester to start organizing projects, community newspapers, and, in Dorchester, a Tenant Action Committee. In 1973 they created the Dorchester Community Action Council (DCAC) to fight for rent control and against the neighborhood deterioration that affected both tenants and homeowners. The council was organizing whites who often believed that neighborhoods deteriorated *because* blacks moved in, but instead of confronting those views, the organizers decided instead to emphasize the institutionalized racism of bankers and real estate interests who busted up white neighborhoods and then victimized the blacks who followed. This "class conscious" strategy deliberately avoided the divisive issue of race.

In 1976 DCAC merged with the citizen action group devoted to energy problems. The new organization called Fair Share adopted an energetic door-to-door canvasing approach in Boston and blue-collar towns like Chelsea and Waltham. Mass Fair Share, headed by Michael Ansara, a former SDSer at Harvard, built up a large statewide membership by hiring student canvassers on a commission basis and received good publicity for its local campaigns on street repairs, playgrounds, schools, housing, taxes, and utilities. The approach was

derived from the ideas of the famous community organizer Saul Alinsky, who believed in the importance of chosing reasonable targets for local groups, so that they could see some successes flowing from their efforts.

Fair Share continued to organize in racially troubled Dorchester. In this tense setting, it set up a number of block clubs in a black and Hispanic area that had become polarized in the aftermath of busing and it tried to build alliances between blacks and working-class whites on issues that transcended race. Fair Share decided not to take a position on busing, which was very much resented in white neighborhoods.[46] Charlotte Ryan, a community organizer who worked in Dorchester at the time, told me that while many individual organizers in Fair Share were personally concerned with fighting racism, they did so in a private way. They agreed with their leaders' decision to avoid divisive racial issues for the purposes of organizing. Ryan shared this view of organizing when she began her work in Dorchester. She also opposed the school busing plan because it was divisive. As a person of Irish working-class origins and a member of a trade union family, she immediately adopted the populist view that you could "unite people around common economic grievances without addressing racism directly." However, after working in the black and Latino sections of Dorchester, Charlotte Ryan changed her thinking about racism. "Like other white people," she told me, "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."[47]

Populist Appeals

Ryan supported Mel King in 1983 while her Fair Share associates backed Ray Flynn. So did other former radicals in the tenant unions and the trade unions, including the militant leader of the Hotel Workers Local 26, Domenic Bozzotto. These movement activists engaged in a public debate about the meaning of populism, an issue which now divided Boston's progressive community.[48] I had already been arguing with populist intellectuals about the historical lessons to be drawn from the past, and I attempted to apply my interpretation to the campaign underway in the city.[49]

The economic populists who supported Flynn embraced an older notion of an exploited class that incorporated poor and working people of all kinds, including small property owners, against the forces of monopoly and the enemies of democracy. They believed that poor blacks and whites shared common problems, common interests, and common enemies. But, this view, I argued, ignored the history of racism in populist movements and the ways in which populist thinking usually avoided racial problems by seeking economic common ground on which poor whites and blacks could stand together.

In my view, Flynn's appeal for economic unity and his fear of divisive issues

like racism harkened back to earlier populist and reform movements that emphasized good government and economic justice as the best antidotes to discrimination. These movements advocated economic democracy 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. "The historic lesson of the populist movement" and of other reform movements was, in my opinion, that racism could not be covered up "by using exclusively economic demands for racial unity." 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. They even argued that Flynn, a former opponent of school desegregation, would be better able to reach out and heal the city's wounds than a leader of the civil rights movement who had dedicated his life to overcoming racial division.[50]

Mel King articulated a very different kind of populism. His was not an economic appeal that reduced social problems to questions about distributing resources in "fair shares."[51] He wanted to redistribute the power over decision-making because in a representative democracy like ours, majority rule often disfranchised entire communities, as it had Boston's small black population. Democracy could easily produce gross forms of inequality. So, instead of a populism aimed at redistribution, King envisioned a new populism based on a transformation of government and politics. He wanted to move beyond representative democracy to participatory democracy— a guiding principle of many of the sixties radical movements whose veterans came together in the Rainbow Coalition. Such a populist movement not only addressed the grievances of poor people against the rich and powerful; it also aimed to change the way poor people thought about each other and about power. It envisioned the birth of a new labor movement, based on the idea of creating new jobs and sharing them rather than on the old practice of protecting them from non-union competitors. Mel King's "transformative populism" was a visionary politics way ahead of its time in 1983.[52]

In the final election, Flynn defeated 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. However, King's election-night gathering seemed like a victory party. Mel had 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, and his campaign had empowered people of color and motivated an upsurge of voter registration among African Americans, Asians, and Latinos. The campaign had also forged a vibrant coalition of people of color, women's groups, gays and lesbians, and other progressive movements who would now play a much larger role in city politics. 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." Indeed, the emergence of movement politics had come a long way since Mel King first ran for the school committee in a campaign that, as he recalled, did not "excite any great interest."[53]

Flynn's Governing Coalition

When he became mayor Ray Flynn hired many of his leftist backers as staffers. Critics called them the Sandinistas in City Hall. The energetic mayor announced his desire to represent all of Boston's neighborhoods. He was seen in all corners of the city, at every kind of meeting and wake, and at many disasters, large and small. He visited a black family attacked by white youth and appealed for calm in a desegregated housing project. He also strongly supported the militant struggles of the multiracial Hotel Workers union. Ray Flynn needed to create a coalition that could govern a city, a city whose political landscape was changing in part because of the social movements that came together in King's Rainbow Coalition. Some of Flynn's supporters said that the mayor "had learned a lot" through the "hard years of suspicion and conflict" that followed the busing conflict, that he had been personally changed by the experience from being a defender of a white neighborhood to being an advocate of working people of all races.[54] Later on, he even joined an anti–Ku Klux Klan march in Georgia, provoking some of his old supporters in South Boston to accuse him of being "used by some of the more radical members of Boston's civil rights brigade."[55]

During Flynn's administration more people of color were employed in the city and on construction jobs, partly as a result of affirmative action policies, but they kept wondering how much had changed for them: they kept worrying about the growing poverty in their neighborhoods and about Flynn's neglect of the desegregated schools. In 1986 activist leaders in the black community expressed their position affirmatively by calling for a plebiscite favoring the separate incorporation of an area of Roxbury to be called Mandela and to be controlled by its fifty thousand residents, overwhelmingly people of color. Only 25 percent of those voting favored the creation of Mandela, but the separatist movement reflected serious alienation from Mayor Flynn's populist coalition.[56] Members of both the white and black establishments reacted to the Mandela plan "with more than anger," Alan Lupo observed. They felt "hurt by those they were helping," and just when things in Boston seemed to be looking better. Personally offended, Mayor Flynn threw his political machine into the fray to defeat the poorly organized movement, while "Mel King, as was his wont, prodded the powers that be" for "behaving like racists who were angry that uppity blacks were resenting and rejecting being patronized."[57]

The Good Old Days

During Mayor Flynn's first term Anthony Lukas's book *Common Ground* took the city by storm. Mayor Flynn and his progressive allies embraced the book as a testament to the failure of movements and policies that made race and racism central targets. They seemed to share Lukas's dim view of busing's consequences: racial conflict and resentment without real improvement in the public schools.[58] As mayor, Flynn all but wrote off the public schools, which now seemed a concern mainly of poor children of color and their parents—people without much voice in City Hall.

Lukas's class analysis was appealing to liberals who endorsed his view that the white working class had absorbed an unfair "burden" of desegregation. The white suburban elites had escaped responsibility, and therefore, Lukas argued, the best solution to the problem of school segregation would have been a metropolitan desegregation plan that would have integrated schools on the basis of class as well as race.

This solution impressed newly class-conscious liberals as well as populists, but it was angrily rejected by civil rights–movement activists. Leaving aside questions of practicality, they charged that the proposal for metropolitan school desegregation ignored Boston's civic responsibility to its public schools. Tom Atkins, the lawyer who brought the case before Judge Garrity's court, addressed the matter this way: "the Supreme Court made it abundantly clear that 'the scope of the violation determines the scope of the remedy.'" In Boston "the copious record compiled in federal court established that *Boston* officials manipulated *Boston* boundary lines, discriminated against blacks in filling *Boston* faculty and administrative ranks . . . deliberately assigned black and white *Boston* students and staff in a racially segregative manner, discriminated in the allocation of *Boston* educational resources . . . deliberately overcrowded *Boston's* black schools when white schools were under-utilized, and deliberately cited *Boston* schools so as to take advantage of *Boston's* residential segregation."[59]

Mel King commented critically on the racial assumptions behind the class-conscious solution Lukas proposed for the school segregation problem. With an edge in his voice he spoke of *Common Ground's* popularity among readers who saw the busing order as "a way in which the so-called preferred people" in the suburbs would be allowed to escape "the burden of the desegregation process." His message to them was: "Black people are not a burden." He denounced this thinking as "a mean and vicious way" of characterizing the city's people of color, as a kind of unwanted burden. "We were, and in fact are, an opportunity," he declared. Desegregation was an opportunity for people who live in this city "to open up and act in the most humane way possible. And they blew it." King concluded that Boston citizens had an opportunity to say, Let's have a city where, in Old Testament terms, "all the tribes were welcome," and not say the

responsibility was on someone else. "The responsibility was right here, and the opportunity was a great one."[60]

Many politically powerful people failed to appreciate the ways in which desegregation had led to school improvements. Though constantly troubled, these institutions had already educated a new generation of citizens who had found some way out of their segregated neighborhoods, playgrounds, and housing projects.[61] It was easy to invoke a popular folk memory of the mythical "good old days" before busing when neighborhood schools existed with stricter classroom discipline, the days before "white flight." But much of this talk was "misplaced nostalgia," according to a recent assessment. Before the busing order, Boston's schools were in bad shape, worse for blacks than whites, but in generally poor condition. In fact, statistics show marked improvement in student achievement in the years since busing. Other studies show that white flight from desegregated schools was not the reason for the decline of white students.[62] A 1995 survey indicated that 85 percent of Boston's parents were satisfied with the "controlled choice assignments" that had evolved out of the 1974 desegregation plan, and that 75 percent had no desire to return to a plan that mandatorily assigned their children to neighborhood schools, as in the "good old days."[63]

Divided Memories

Bitter memories of court-ordered busing remain strong among many white Bostonians, and for many parents, including many people of color, the accomplishments of the black education movement may be unclear or even unknown. It is an older generation of civil rights activists in the black community and their allies who carry the memory of what difference the movement for educational equality made. They know how much was accomplished in Boston after educational apartheid was dismantled. And they know how little would have been achieved if institutional racism had not been confronted head on. It was this moral and political imperative Mel King carried into citywide politics after the busing conflict.

Bostonians can look back on the exciting election of 1983 in two very different ways. It can be seen as most city leaders would see it—as a turning point in the city's race relations when Raymond Flynn of South Boston created a new kind of governing coalition that reached out into communities of color and took on issues that helped heal the city's open wounds. For Flynn and his supporters it was a kind of "populist moment" when a local guy mobilized the working-class neighborhoods to take City Hall and give it back to the people. Or the mayoral election of 1983 can be seen, as it is here, not as "a moment of triumph" but as a "moment of democratic possibility."[64] For King and his followers political empowerment is not usually gained in the electoral arena. Nor do elections radically alter who gets what in terms of public resources and in

terms of the opportunities public policy can create. They simply decide who governs on a short-term basis. In Mel King's eyes, community-based struggles for control must be waged to ensure any real democracy and equality in how the government functions. He said later that those movements are rarely able to coalesce and effectively take control of government. When they try and fail to do so in the electoral arena, "people go back to their own struggles."[65] And that is as it must be. A coalition of movements is only as strong as its constituent elements. Its strength comes from their strength.

King was unable to keep the Boston Rainbow Coalition together after the 1983 campaign, but that practical example of unified movement politics remained an inspiration to others, notably to Jesse Jackson who adopted its form and much of its content in his 1984 and 1988 presidential campaigns in the national Democratic primaries. The second campaign was won by a Massachusetts politician, our Governor Michael Dukakis, who espoused a "disinterested" managerial liberalism which distanced him from the class-conscious liberalism of the New Deal and from the race-conscious liberalism that appeared during the mid-1960's.[66] By contrast, Jackson's Rainbow campaign brought movement politics into the national arena just as Mel King brought it into the urban arena in Boston. Jesse Jackson articulated with passion and intelligence the concerns for social justice and economic equality that the labor and civil rights movements had injected into national politics during earlier times.

Even after more than decade of retreat from those politics, and even after the Reagan Revolution spread racial resentment and dismantled the welfare state, a civil rights activist and radical populist gave people of color a reason to have hope in politics. He even captured the hearts and minds of thousands of angry white working-class voters hurt by conservative politicians and their policies, hurt by what Jackson called "economic violence." His 1988 primary campaign took everyone by surprise and suggested that "simmering beneath the surface" of electoral conservatism there might be "a radical antagonism to the new politics of inequality."[67]

I thought then that Jackson's campaign represented something more. Like Mel King, he took on racism, the Achilles heel of previous populist campaigns which had called for economic justice but refused to attack racial inequality. In 1988 Jesse Jackson became the nation's first prominent black populist consciously building on the legacy of the civil rights movement and its accomplishments. His campaign represented another exciting moment of democratic possibility when citizens could vote for economic justice *and* social equality.[68]

The movements created two or three decades ago to fight for civil rights and neighborhood survival, for community empowerment and radical social change in cities like Boston are no longer as vital as they used to be. Even the community-based institutions created by social movements struggle to survive in a more conservative political environment that discourages citizen action. But perhaps the historical experience of these forerunners will be of value to the

leaders of social change in the future. Someday, when they are strong enough, these new leaders will come together to form a coalition to decide who governs. Then, white people in the city will find themselves in a new position within coalition politics. Perhaps movement history will offer some counsel.

Few movements in U.S. history have actually involved white people learning from black people's struggles. The Rainbow Coalition in Boston was a product of that social learning, and Mel King was as much a teacher as a political leader. In the early 1960s, he helped initiate a black education movement that led to the school desegregation process in the 1970s. That challenge to the status quo created an activist core in the black community with Mel King at its center; it was a core of inspiration for many other protest movements that soon emerged. In 1983, King's Rainbow campaign mobilized the Asian and Hispanic communities, as well as other neighborhood groups and various social movements composed of white people who had learned their own lessons from the black freedom struggle, a struggle that itself had "gone through all the stages of developing consciousness and competence" and had reached a point at which it could become the center of a wider coalition of movement people.[69]

This account of movement history in Boston is based upon the narrative of Mel King, who lived that story. He believes it is unfinished, still unfolding, like "a chain of change still being forged." Mel's story of Boston told of "changing relationships, between people of color and white folks; between have-nots and have-a-lots; between men and women." It was, and is, a story with a moral. "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," King wrote. "We will be able to influence larger sections of the city, bringing together an array of potential allies." "Further movement" in our kind of society will be filled with conflict-producing tensions, but movement people have to work through them to "come together" and move "out of their isolation" to challenge conditions that exploit them all. Somewhere in the future, Mel King believes, lies a city of hope in "which all the tribes are welcome."[70]