

Inspiring Change and Dangerous Hope: Unequal Representation in the Commonwealth

A Collaborative Essay

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Symbolic change is powerful. It leads people to believe in issues important to them, and it lends people something dangerous: hope. We searched Wikipedia to find a former governor that inspires us. From the very first governor to the current one, there are many aspects to admire. John Hancock inspired us due to the loss of his father and the challenges that follow a fatherless child. We cannot imagine how, in 1744, a 7 yr. old Hancock could eventually become a “founding father” of our nation. Inspiring indeed.

However, Hancock is not without criticism. He also owned a slave, which is morally reprehensible and inhumane. That slave --whose name we could not find-- was not represented in the Commonwealth. And, therein lies the problem. Our democracy, as great as it is, remains imperfect. Even the most courageous leaders among us are trapped by the era in which we live; an era where voices that matter are not heard, the young, the poor. How can we break free from those bonds?

Two other governors we found inspiring were John Andrew and Deval Patrick. Through researching their lives, we found the connection. During Governor Andrew's lifetime, we can't imagine the violence he faced for his views to abolish slavery. This was not lost on Governor Patrick and being the first black governor, perhaps African-Americans felt proud to be included. Our question is: was that pride deep enough to cut through party lines? Does identity matter more than policy? Or, is policy driven by identity, thus excluding those of a different identity?

We felt pride when our state elected a woman. We are ready for the change. But are the people who sit in governorship ready for it? It leaves us with more questions than answers. Will there be a seat at the table for people who may be different, or express policy views that differ from yours? History tells us the answer is no. We hear the outcry that there has never been an elected woman to hold the governor's office, until Governor Healey. Is the outcry because women were underrepresented when men ruled the office? Yes. Now, we have a woman in power, will that mean men will be underrepresented? History tells us the answer is yes because history has shown when someone that is different from you, then those who share that identity are underrepresented or repressed.

As we look carefully at the list of former governors, we find that none appear to be Latino or Asian. Does that mean those groups will be underrepresented today, as they have been in the centuries before? There's never been a Latino or Asian governor, and consequentially, their policy issues have never been a priority to the governor's office. Will that continue?

Our proposal is to break from tradition, to hang nothing but an empty frame to remind you that there will be large groups of people that remain underrepresented, voiceless and invisible. Look forward not back for your inspiration. Look to the young, the poor, the people of color, and the ones who need the most help. Look at the empty frame and then around the table and ask, "Who is not represented here?" Then, break free from the symbolic fetters that bind you and invite them. We say this as students whose backgrounds are all different, but we have something in common: we all want to see change. And we all have that extremely dangerous thing: Hope.