

PREFACE: A CITY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The Boston we love is a city that takes care of each other, where hard work meets big dreams with grit and resilience. But for too many, it's been impossible to dream when you're fighting to hold on. Fighting to afford to stay. Fighting for our kids. Fighting a system that wasn't built for us, doesn't speak our languages, doesn't hear our voices. (Michelle Wu, as a candidate for mayor)



On November 2, 2021, Boston achieved a transformative moment, electing the first woman and person of color as mayor in its two-hundred-year history. Forty-six White men had led Boston since it was incorporated in 1822. Most were called “Yankees” or were of Irish descent. Before incorporation, Boston was led by many White selectmen since being settled in 1630.¹ In 2021, Boston voters elected Michelle Wu as mayor. She won a decisive and historic victory on a progressive platform promising to bring the benefits of growth to Boston’s long-forgotten residents and respond to climate change, lack of affordable housing, inequality, transportation, and racism. Her platform would build considerably upon the unfinished business initiated forty years earlier by progressive mayor Ray Flynn.

Harken back to the final mayoral election in 1983 between two progressive candidates: Mel King of the South End, the first African American to reach the final election, and Ray Flynn of South Boston. When the 201,000 ballots were counted, 70 percent of the electorate, the largest turnout since 1949, voted for a new direction in Boston. The downtown power brokers were defeated, leading to decisive changes in the political structure. Flynn was elected Boston’s fifty-second mayor in 1983 and would go on to lead the city for nearly a decade. This book is about the inspiring journey to transform Boston under Flynn into a progressive city where its poor and working-class residents would have a fair shot in a rapidly changing economy.

Boston has a well-deserved reputation for racial and ethnic hostility and inequality. This book is drawn from many of the stories of Bostonians who helped change the story and the city’s unlikely champion who led the

transformation to a more equitable, progressive Boston. The pivotal role of community organizers and neighborhood leaders in Flynn's election underscores the political dynamics that led to the rejection of the growth machine coalition and the racial politics of the past. These marked a profound realignment of power relationships in the city and were a testament to the indomitable spirit of these progressive activists and elected officials. This case study captures a crucial period in the city's history that paved the way for a progressive city in the late twentieth century.

This book is not a series of detached observations but a testament to my deep involvement in these issues. I was there. My work with tenants, young people in Boston's neighborhoods, and public housing tenants revealed to me the growing divide in the city. I felt a personal responsibility to contribute to the change that was needed. I led neighborhood services and economic and workforce development efforts in Flynn's administration, providing me with a unique vantage point into the workings of Boston City Hall and the activism in every neighborhood. This book is a product of that history.

As the book recounts, Flynn implemented an economic justice and progressive social policy agenda as mayor. His successor, Tom Menino, who served for twenty years, abandoned many of Flynn's policies and set a different course for the city. The next mayor, Marty Walsh, was in the Flynn mold. He centered his administration on addressing class and race issues, but Boston was so different by then that most people had forgotten Flynn's achievements. Following Walsh, Wu campaigned on a progressive platform for a very different city that continued to have significant economic and racial inequalities. Boston had increasingly become a tale of two cities. When Wu was elected, the wealthiest 5 percent of Boston residents had 25 percent of total income, while the bottom 60 percent had only 22 percent.² The shortage of affordable housing exacerbated the widening gap. Flynn had a redistributive agenda—a social contract with Boston that when the city moves ahead, everybody moves ahead together.

Peter Kadzis, a WGBH reporter who covered Boston politics, compared Boston's previous five mayors to Wu in her first year in office. "Michelle Wu has more in common with Ray Flynn's first year than people might think. That's because when Ray Flynn became mayor, Boston was still recovering from the intense racial animosity from Boston's school desegregation. Michelle Wu took over when the city, as was the nation, was still recovering from George Floyd's murder. Ray Flynn beat Mel King, the first Black politician to compete city-wide for mayor, and Wu faced a multi-ethnic field of opponents. There is a common thread of Black power for Flynn and Wu."³ Race would be a defining issue for Flynn

and virtually every Boston mayor during their terms in office. Mayors Walsh and Wu each told me that the legacy of racial injustice in the city is part of every policy consideration.⁴

While the book is framed through several theoretical lenses, its sociological underpinnings include ethnographic interviews with more than seventy people who were kind enough to speak to me. In the interviews, which sociologists call retrospective autoethnography, I used past personal experiences to identify and analyze sociologically relevant events and archival and historical records. I tried to be sparing with the theory, providing a greater exposition of the theoretical frameworks and a comparison with several other cities in the appendices for those readers wanting to delve deeper. The stories are woven together in what I hope is a comprehensive portrayal and analysis of what happened, why, and what it meant during the late twentieth century and into the next century in the city. It doesn't cover every bit of history or answer every question, but still, it gives the reader a portrait of the progressive challenges and opportunities during that era.

When Flynn took office, he cracked down on racial violence and expanded linkage—a fee on commercial office development—to fund affordable housing. He created the first-in-the-nation job training component to linkage and required developers to hire Boston residents, people of color, and women. He heard the same objections from the real estate and development community that Marty Walsh and Michelle Wu also rejected. “Shortsighted business lobby groups and their political allies should not have a monopoly on what it means to be pro-business. A healthy business climate is one in which people can afford to pay for decent housing, work in safe conditions, have adequate health care, and breathe clean air. Government’s role is often to ensure that businesses live up to this responsibility.”⁵

Mayors Walsh and Wu have supported and expanded Flynn’s progressive initiatives. They, and Menino, supported the appointed school committee Flynn put in place, avoiding a return to a decentralized bureaucratic political governance model that has historically operated in the interest of adults—not children. Their redistributive agenda included increasing linkage fees and inclusionary housing, mandating low- to moderate-income housing as part of each development, and each proposed a transfer tax on multimillion-dollar real estate sales, which would have produced, between 2019 and 2022, almost \$384 million to build affordable housing.⁶ Wu also proposed a rent stabilization ordinance, which has widespread support from Boston⁷ and statewide,⁸ as shown in polls. The proposal has been the victim of legislative inaction. Flynn, too, was hampered on rent control by a conservative city

council. While he controlled the mayor's office, the growth machine controlled the city council. Now, too, it looks like they control the State House.

Wu had an early opening to get results. As a progressive mayor with a like-minded city council and overwhelming support from the people of Boston, enacting these proposals seemed within reach. As Wu acknowledged, "City Government has always been a place where we try and solve hard problems; this political moment is quite intense in a combination of so many different issues that are so urgent to our families."⁹

Wu and her administration, however, need to more effectively organize to get the overwhelmingly Democratic legislature to support her key initiatives. According to Joan Vennoch, writing in the *Boston Globe*,

Michelle Wu's success or failure as mayor won't depend on members of the Boston business community—but on her ability to stick with what she believes in and build the coalitions necessary to turn her progressive promises into progressive policies. If there's a constant, the same old argument is that rent control and affordable housing requirements will stifle growth. It didn't then, and it won't now. To press that argument, Wu needs the same tools as Flynn. She needs continued support from the grass-roots activists who believed in her campaign for mayor. She needs allies in the business community who are willing to publicly dismiss the propaganda that progressive policies are bad for business. She also needs allies in the Legislature who will back her plan to reinstate rent control and reorganize the city's planning structure. Flynn thought like a community organizer. Every battle for a policy was a campaign.¹⁰

Together, these progressive initiatives could be a meaningful victory for the people of Boston, with campaign promises and long-sought dreams fulfilled for poor and working-class families and the city's children. By listening to and championing their voices while promoting meaningful engagement of Boston's community organizers, activists, and residents, the city's progressive leadership can learn from the past and know that a more just and equitable "city on a hill" is within reach. This book looks at how we might get there again.