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Rehearsal for the Great Depression: A City in Search of a Policy

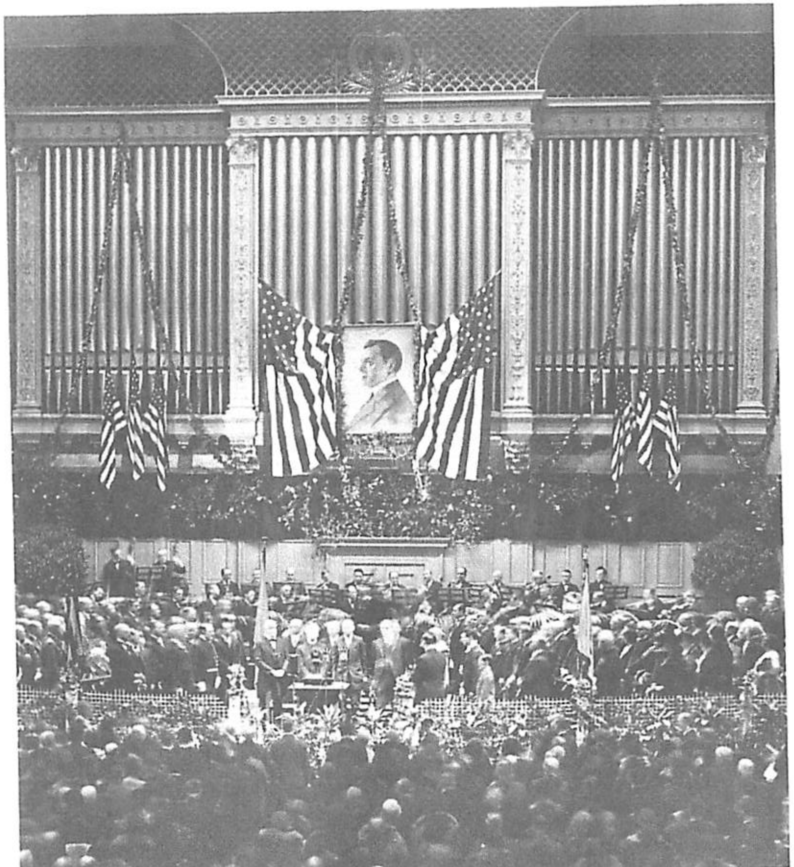
No American city entered 1930 a *tabula rasa*. Rather, cities carried into the Great Depression their own particular economic practices, social structures, and political outlooks: prejudices developed over time imposed constraints. City dwellers, if the instance of Boston can be abstracted, nevertheless generated bountiful suggestions for mitigating business failures. Urban centers, after all, neither declared intellectual bankruptcy nor wallowed in all that was deliberately retrograde, pernicious, venal. Yet in the search for usable ideas each city was hamstrung by the identity which each had assumed. That urban administrations—James Michael Curley's included—would move uncertainly in their quests for workable solutions should have surprised no one. Shackled by what their pasts would permit, cities limited their responses within narrow, often predictable confines.

At Symphony Hall on January 6, 1930, James Michael Curley took the mayor's oath for the third time. The ninety-minute ceremony lasted fourteen times longer than the swearing in of James J. Walker in New York, and Curley aides insisted that this discrepancy fairly measured the difference in worth of the two men. Lacing his inaugural remarks with references to the colonial era, Curley reas-

sured his listeners that as Boston entered its tercentenary year, the lessons learned by those who had braved the wilderness in 1630 would not be forgotten. "The problems that in our day bulk large are infinitesimal as contrasted with those in evidence in the days of the founders," he said, "and can be solved by the same methods in our days as in their day, namely, through cooperation and self-reliance." As he talked of communality and individualism, Curley glossed over the potential incompatibility of the two doctrines. The tension between "commonwealth" and individual striving, known so well to the Puritan divines extolled by Curley, would become the central dilemma for his administration.[1]

The Mayor devoted a substantial portion of his inaugural address to the faltering economy. Departing from those who were attributing unemployment to technological change or to fiendish stock manipulators, he asserted that joblessness, poverty, crime, and disease had resulted from the absence of "a sane economic policy." The solution lay in furnishing "work and wages to those in need of sustenance and employment." To this end, said Curley, "The city can do much, but private industry properly encouraged can do more, and to the promotion and encouragement of commerce and industry our effort should be directed." The Mayor's bow to private enterprise drew a salvo of applause, for in January of 1930 it was widely believed that the slump would be temporary and that business still possessed powers of self-regeneration.

In his first address, the Mayor also aligned Boston behind "the program of national planning inaugurated by President Hoover . . . to promote prosperity." [2] Terming the President's call for public construction "courageous," the Mayor expressed satisfaction that Hoover was pinning his greatest hopes for recovery to action on the local level.[3] Curley, as he had in his election campaign, again urged a Fifty-Year Plan to develop industry, commerce, and municipal construction. Boston would put its jobless to work on a golf course, new libraries, health units, and recreation facilities; the salaries and personnel of city government would be increased. By emphasizing long-range economic planning and city-financed construction as re-



Much like the icon screen of an Orthodox Church, Symphony Hall in 1930 is resplendent for the inauguration of Boston's central political saint, James Michael Curley. Boston University School of Communication.

storatives, Curley had placed himself in advance of mayors in several other cities.

Even as Curley promised Boston its own prosperity program, one with progressive overtones, he had not wandered very far into new pastures. Some of his objectives were clearly political. Upping the

number of salaried municipal employees, for example, made his talk of planning suspect, for he was surely mindful that his army of campaign workers needed rewards. When he asked the state legislature in his inaugural address to surrender its power over Boston's tax limit and also give the city the right to incur 50 percent more debt, he may well have hoped for a bonanza such as his machine had never before enjoyed. Indeed, his talk about spending was most ambiguous. On the one hand, he wanted a $10-million hike in the debt limit for street improvements, yet in the same speech he vowed pay-as-you-go budgeting. In suggesting that Boston federate with its surrounding forty-three towns, in order, he said, to get the suburbs to share responsibility for inner-city services, he may well have hoped to extend his influence. A Cambridge official thought as much. "Metropolitan Boston," he asserted, "is Curley gone Napoleon." [4]

Whether politically inspired or not, public works for the unemployed, home rule, and metropolitan government all made sense. So did the decision to spend rather than retrench. Indeed, Curley's program, whatever the motivation behind it, seemed on target. National, state, and municipal government would work together; the business community and private philanthropy would supplement municipal efforts. Even the staunchly Republican *Herald* praised Curley for exhibiting "that boldness and comprehensiveness with which the President goes at things." The *Herald* added: "The Mayor is open to the charge, which is a compliment, of being a Hooverite, at least non-politically." [5] Part of the rub for ultimate cooperation, however, was that Curley's instincts ran strongly toward partisanship.

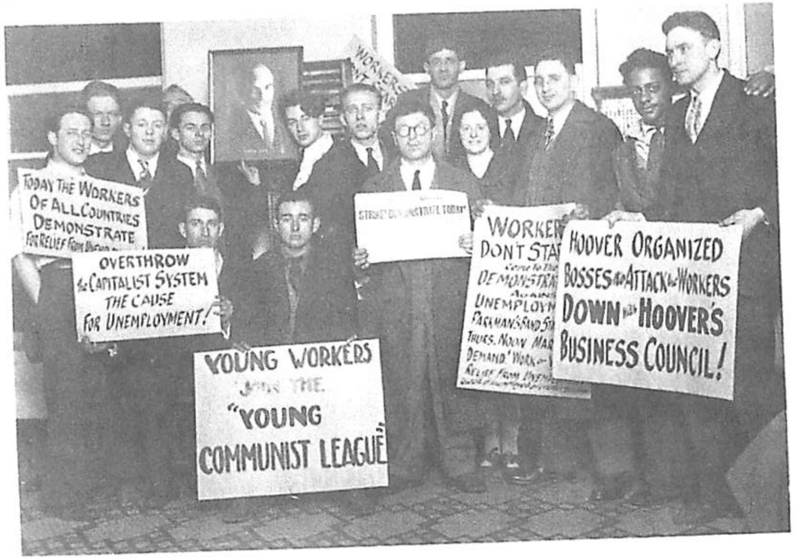
With his inauguration behind him, Curley barraged the city council with messages which both sought to implement and add to the major works projects outlined on January 6. Before the month went by, Curley had submitted a $7,500,000 package to be financed by borrowing, a sum equal to 90 percent of all the money the city could lawfully appropriate outside the state-imposed debt limit, and he had asked the Massachusetts legislature for permission to borrow $17,500,000 more. At the same time, Curley placed considerable emphasis on the approach to recovery so congenial to Republicans. On February 1, Curley asked the city council for a $25,000 appropriation to establish a Commercial and Industrial Publicity Bureau, an organization which would integrate the efforts of municipal government and local enterprises. At a Chamber of Commerce dinner, he invited "the new 400"—representatives of the business community—to cooperate with the Bureau and donated $5,000 out of his own bank account to dramatize the need for voluntary subscription. Curley told the Publicity Bureau to do all that it could to hold onto existing business and to attract new firms as well. "Faith without works," said the Mayor, "is of no avail." [6]

Recognizing that large projects would neccessitate heavy outlays for materials, thereby cutting into wages, and aware that start-up delays would be inevitable, the Mayor further diversified his attack by resorting to occasional make-work. The jobless would clean up Boston for the tercentenary celebration, he announced, and he set crews to sandblasting highways and washing them with acid. To spread the work, the Mayor approved the use of day labor instead of contract labor on all city projects and eliminated overtime, even though his decisions added 12 percent to costs. And during a February snowstorm the Curley administration had to respond to a crush of applicants who wanted shoveling jobs at $5 a day. When some thirteen hundred men crammed into every available inch of space at the Municipal Employment Bureau, unintentionally breaking doors and windows, the city hired a thousand workers, seven hundred more than would have been normal.

As snow shovelers rushed frantically for jobs, and as Curley launched his whirlwind search for remedies, unemployment worsened. No one knew how many were out of work, and estimates taken from February through April varied wildly, ranging from a low of 41,000 (ca. 11.5 percent of the labor force) to a high of 100,000 (28.5 percent).[7] But among Boston's poor, statistics were beside the point: on January 24, 1930, a destitute man toppled to the sidewalk in downtown Boston, dead from hunger. At Faneuil Hall Navy Yard workers rallied in protest of layoffs, and Harvard solved its problem with the state minimum wage commission by dismissing twenty charwomen rather than raise their pay from 35 cents to 37 cents an hour. The Boston Central Labor Union, cognizant of the mounting labor surplus, discovered that when a hundred striking bakers were locked out, jobless members of other unions stood in line to replace them. While the Musicians Union started a soup kitchen, the Typographers were setting up a relief fund for their unemployed members. In Boston, portents of the Great Depression came early, and before long the unemployed took to the streets.

The city's first full-scale unemployment disturbance broke out on March 6, 1930, when nearly four thousand men and women gathered at the Parkman Bandstand on the Common, the equivalent of London's Hyde Park. The Boston Council of the Unemployed, reportedly a Communist front, sponsored the demonstration. "We are determined not to starve," a spokesman insisted. Calling for work and wages, speakers gibed at the municipal, state, and federal governments for their lethargy. Governor Allen and Mayor Curley were denounced for ringing the Boston Common with police, and the American Federation of Labor was chastised for failing to endorse an unemployment insurance plan. When the group began to march on the heavily guarded State House (the Hall of Flags had been barricaded), police, many of them on horseback, charged. Blows rained down on the banner-carrying throng, yet only eight arrests were made.

Predictably, the police denounced the entire group as "reds." The disturbance had, indeed, been led by Communists, most of them from the Needle Trade Workers' Industrial Union,[8] and those who had been jailed, the police told reporters, were singing "a series of Communistic songs." To have attributed the upheaval solely to Communism within the NTWIU, however, was misleading. When a speaker asked the gathering how many needed work, hundreds in the crowd raised their hands. Moreover, the press noted that "all addresses were in moderation." The disturbances, mild in comparison to those in Detroit and New York, involved not just Bolsheviki but a large number of genuinely distressed workers.



Members of the Trade Union Unity League and the Council of the Unemployed cluster around a portrait of V. I. Lenin in March 1930. Repeated demonstrations by leftists, although never massive, signaled to Bostonians that a turbulent era lay ahead. Boston University School of Communication.

Throughout the spring of 1930, "unemployment riots"—as the newspapers called them—intensified, and Mayor Curley branded all public demonstrations as Communist-inspired. Accurately calculating that most Roman Catholics and Brahmins alike approved of a show of strength, and uneager for his administration to lose face, he took an ever more militant stand against "Red Roosters" during 1930. May Day and the third anniversary of the Sacco-Vanzetti executions in August again precipitated altercations between workers and the police. An October march on the national convention of the American Federation of Labor, meeting in Boston, brought out two hundred police, including a special "Flying Squadron" equipped with machine guns, bulletproof vests, and tear-gas bombs. The demonstrators sought to dramatize the need for unemployment insurance, and mayhem ensued. Workers denounced the assault on

female pickets as brutal enough "to make Baron Münchausen laugh." One worker in the South End was charged with larceny for taking away a blackjack from a police captain. Curley, who had asked in July for "the application of the same character of courage . . . that made possible the firing of the shot heard around the world at Lexington" to "solve the problem of Communism we face today," demanded that the demonstrators, all of whom he erroneously branded as aliens, be deported to Russia.[9] Giving scant comfort to those who challenged the efficacy of capitalism, the Mayor urged labor to be patient.

At the same time that the unemployed were daily becoming more

Leftists at a Parkman Bandstand rally, Boston Common, March 1930. Boston University School of Communication.

At the Parkman Bandstand in early March 1930, Jack McCarthy of the Trade Union Unity League denounces police brutality against jobless demonstrators. As rallies of the unemployed in 1930 quickened, Bostonians realized that a depression—not a mere recession—was at hand. Boston University School of Communications.

evident, the Mayor was thwarted by the Republican-controlled state legislature. Curley, who had argued that the Greater Boston community would "sink together" if it did not "row together," watched a modest metropolitan government bill die in early February.[10] Several of his more important political appointments were blocked by the Civil Service Commission, and the General Court restricted the Mayor's fiscal maneuverability. Paring millions from Curley's street building and repair program, the Municipal Finance Committee allowed only $6 million to be borrowed outside the debt limit. The state also failed to provide public works which might have been of use to the idle men and women of Boston, and modest victories did not atone for the generally penurious outlook.[11] From the sidelines, Curley angrily watched as an Advisory Committee of the Massachusetts Department of Labor and Industries perfunctorily at-

tempted to study unemployment, an undertaking that ranked with the old order's most appalling defeatism. Holding that it had been "practically impossible to secure any accurate measure" of unemployment patterns, the committee recommended the voluntary cooperation of private industry to get information and make large expenditures unnecessary. To spend money "on public works *after* business has fallen into a depression has been suggested many times," said the fact finders. "Yet under this makeshift proposal little has ever been done." [12]

Boston, then, would have to rely on its own substantial revenues, and Curley and the city council raised the tax rate $2.80 per thousand when they approved the regular city budget in April of 1930. Allowed by the state legislature to boost spending just 4 percent, a modest rise that nevertheless kept Boston's per capita outlays the highest in the nation,[13] the city officials watched cumulative welfare costs spiral to over $3,500,000 by the end of the year, up some 32 percent from 1929. Although able to maintain more adequate relief payments to its 11,000 clients (a 34 percent increase) than other cities,[14] Boston faced lengthening lines at the municipal welfare department and rising unemployment. Both developments signaled that far more aid and new approaches were needed.

Unable to get the state's assent for construction loans and locked into a budget set in April, James Michael Curley spoke out on what he would and would not do were he to have the free hand which, of course, he sadly lacked. These utterances, sometimes ambivalent and contradictory, revealed both the alternatives and the conundrums that major American cities faced during the second half of 1930. Moreover, the responses Curley's proposals elicited from various groups in the city would in part stake out the political boundaries within which the city's leaders would have to operate.

Repeatedly, Curley spoke against the "dole system." By "the dole," Curley meant not only public-welfare payments with no work demanded but any form of unemployment insurance. Drawing his lessons from what he regarded as England's negative experience of having spent in excess of $2 billion during the 1920s, Curley argued that an outright grant of money "saps initiative, and makes of a man a chronic loafer." Three decades of the dole in England, he pointed out, had accelerated "the disappearance of the type of Englishman that the world has known during the last five centuries, the domineering type," and had substituted "servile mendicants." Europe's health- and unemployment-insurance systems, he added, were nothing less than monarchical plots "for the continuance in power of royal blood." [15]

The Mayor's repudiation of direct grants to the jobless, whether federal, state, or municipal, drew overwhelmingly favorable notices. When in August Curley attacked the English system and asked for the reincarnation of the "spirit of the Pioneers," 10,000 delegates to a Knights of Columbus convention roared their approval. Moreover, the Boston Central Labor Union, like its parent, the American Federation of Labor, shared Curley's view that unemployment-insurance systems warranted no support. And when Congress proposed a $25 million appropriation for drought relief in Texas, the Boston Clearing House Association, a bankers' organization, termed the measure "a precedent for the uneconomic, soul-destroying dole" and charged that the legislation constituted "political interference" in local affairs.[16]

The Chamber of Commerce not only opposed direct relief but also procrastinated when asked to rethink its reason for being. In March of 1930, for instance, Andrew Peters—a Republican progressive and former mayor of Boston—had joined Curley in goading the Chamber. "Today is no longer the day of the individualist," Peters had said. "It is no longer the day of destructive competition but the day of constructive cooperation." Three months later, Curley announced that progress was being made: business leaders, the Mayor stated, had at last hatched a plan to eradicate unemployment. "The size and scope of the project . . . will draw the eyes of the entire country to Boston as a community that dares to go ahead when others hesitate," Curley declared, and Peters also expressed cautious satisfaction that the Chamber of Commerce was starting to budge. The details of the plan, however, were not spelled out until November,

and they proved extremely disappointing: consumers, said the Chamber, should spend. In addition, the organization posted letters to its six thousand members, asking them "to quicken the end of this readjustment period by saving a job for some man and giving a new one to a worker now in the ranks of the unemployed." "Save-a-Job" schemes, however, every bit as much as buying campaigns without purchasing power, proved ludicrously inadequate and a far cry from the more collectivist message which Andrew Peters had formulated some five months earlier.[17]

Curley also asked employers not to cut wages, and he even hinted that "reprisals on the part of the public" could be expected if employers continued to reduce their payrolls. Wage cuts and layoffs, said the Mayor, were self-defeating, and he deplored the prevailing "psychology of fear." When companies ignored his message, however, reprisals were not forthcoming. The Boston Central Labor Union, in fact, took no action in November of 1930 when a delegate from the Hotel and Restaurant Workers pressed for strikes against firms that were chopping wages. Moreover, the Consumers' League was starting to discover sweatshops reappearing in Boston, yet its white-label campaigns were largely unavailing: when given free choice, customers bought candy whether or not employers paid female workers less than Massachusetts Wage Commission standards, and without regard for unsanitary production practices which included "finger licking and using saliva to separate the candy cups." While most employers tried to be more responsible than this, it was equally clear that when faced with a choice between paying dividends to stockholders and maintaining wages, dividends won nearly every time.[18]

Discouraged by voluntarism, but surely not in a position to disown it either, the Mayor meandered toward advocacy of federal assistance. In August, he was wondering whether the nation had the will to solve its problems. The United States in 1930, said Curley, contained "people on the borderland of starvation" while a small number possessed "the vast wealth of the country" with no apparent willingness "to contribute either money or thought to the relief of those in need." Unfortunately, noted Curley, the Hoover administration, "being an engineering one," was "still in the blueprint stage" and was substituting "a sugar-coated palliative . . . for a major surgical operation." Hoover, suggested Curley, should set up a federal commission to protect the workers of America, a commission empowered to limit hours, guarantee a "saving wage," and combat the evils of automation. The Mayor wanted Washington to sponsor public works, but in the next breath he disconsolately noted the shortcomings of slow and costly major construction. On the city's $3-million subway extension, where an extra shift had been installed, he confessed only 400 men were receiving a wage.[19]

Curley mixed radical rhetoric with older formulas. Coming before the State Federation of Labor, the Mayor railed against the hardships suffered by the unemployed who faced the impossibility of paying taxes or meeting bank charges. He said that banks were preparing "to take away the fruit of the workers' toil of a lifetime because of the industrial depression for which the worker is not responsible." He did not, however, urge the state to adopt mortgage moratoria or other banking legislation, and he went no further than to ask the banks to be merciful. Neither did Curley sustain any drive for tax reform to redistribute wealth, and in Boston of 1930—a city in which Cardinal O'Connell was lavishing praise on J. P. Morgan and in which property owners were incensed over a mild rise in the city tax rate—that idea would most likely have been opposed. But Curley nevertheless felt that "the wealthy capitalist, the educator, [and] the leaders of religious thought" might join with organized labor to develop a sound economic program for Boston and the rest of the nation.[20]

Consequently, in September Curley summoned what he later called his "Brain Trust" for weekly "unemployment conferences." This exceptionally able group, which included Karl Compton, the president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, progressive businessmen, labor leaders such as James T. Moriarty, and a sprinkling of professors gave Curley an opportunity to float trial balloons and win prestigious backing for his proposals. Meeting at the Parker

House for the first time on September 30, the conferees heard Curley push for the universal establishment of the five-day week, a $1 billion expenditure for the improvement of the Mississippi Valley, long-range planning of public works programs, and the creation of a Federal Industrial Planning Commission. He wanted the commission to be nonpartisan, to coordinate works activities, and to cooperate with city, state, and regional associations. By December 1930, Curley was convinced that "Federal planning would be but an enlargement of present sound policy of city planning which in European countries not only enjoys government sanction but is compulsory." He hoped to stabilize industry by building up funds during prosperous times which could be expended quickly during periods of recession.[21]

Some years later, the Mayor looked back to 1930 and claimed that Franklin Roosevelt had taken over a program which he, James Michael Curley, had devised. Eventually, Curley equated his Mississippi project with the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Federal Industrial Planning Board with the National Recovery Administration, his Unemployment Conference with Roosevelt's "Brain Trust." Unquestionably, Curley had traveled some distance in his first year in office. His pleas for a billion-dollar federal public works program and his decision to endorse old-age pensions and public health insurance were distinctly liberal. He personally visited President Hoover to urge the Planning Commission, the Mississippi Project, and federal cession of Governor's Island to the City of Boston for large-scale public works projects on an expanded municipal airport. If Curley's messages of 1930 are read selectively and if the advantages of hindsight can be excused, a case can be made that he advocated the comprehensive use of national power. And yet to bind together Curley's proposals into a coherent package is fatal to an understanding of a man who unblushingly combined voluntary "Build Now" campaigns with praise for the outright statism of Mussolini.[22]

Curley, never very convincing as an ideologue, inched away from traditionalism because of local political pressures and changing economic conditions. His advocacy of national solutions came at the same time he struggled with the city council over municipal problems of a new variety. During this tug of war, the council insisted that Curley accommodate the jobless, but often in ways unpalatable to the Mayor. The council, in effect, was making clear to the Mayor of Boston that there were things he could not do—at least not without a fight.

Always the political man, Curley rightly suspected the sinister motivations of a council in which he had few friends, and they, in turn, properly suspected the Mayor. Curley disliked ideas for which he could not take credit, and he therefore denounced council suggestions as mere patchwork. Forced to counter with proposals of his own, he passed the buck to higher levels of government. Several councilors charged that Curley's new posture as a theoretician favoring federal activism constituted blatant temporizing. "It is all right for highbrows to meet at the Parker House," said John I. Fitzgerald of Martin Lomasney's Ward 3 in a reference to Curley's Brain Trust, "but what do highbrows know about the poor?" The Mayor countered that old formulas for dealing with the consequences of a wildly gyrating economic cycle were sorely outmoded. But Curley's most vocal nemeses on the council, men like Fitzgerald, John Dowd of Ward 8 (Roxbury), and Francis E. ("Frankie") Kelly of Ward 15 (Dorchester), would then roast Curley as a man who shielded "four-flushers" in chauffeur-driven cars while others suffered.[23]

In a dress rehearsal for the entire Depression decade, Curley and his volatile city council clashed in 1930 over a number of issues. The council insisted on more flexible attitudes toward tax collection and ordered that a proposed sale of property by the city for back taxes be postponed. In addition, the ward representatives asked that homeowners be granted an installment plan to pay off outstanding obligations. Yet Curley ignored the council's votes, possibly because his liberalism ended when payments to his administration would be delayed.

The council also desired control over the Municipal Employment Bureau in which Curley had placed political favorites. To gain public

support, councilors blasted the policy which allowed contractors doing business with the city (Curley's "pet contractors," some said) to hire aliens (usually Italians) at only $3 to $4 a day. Instead, asserted Curley's opponents, the city should take on naturalized residents of Boston at the regular $5 rate. R. Gardiner Wilson, Jr. (Ward 17, Dorchester), one of just three Republicans on the council, wanted the Municipal Employment Bureau's director to have the authority to go to contractors "with a figurative gun" and "back these babies to the wall, and make them either hire citizens to do the work of the city or go out of business." In answer to those who asserted that an insufficient number of naturalized workers existed to fill the jobs, Wilson snapped, "If there was ever a public hearing in this hall to determine the fact that there are no able-bodied citizens available in Boston as laborers at $5 a day, they would need 10,000 to 15,000 men to rebuild City Hall after the riot was over." [24] Curley, however, showed little inclination to crack down on the hiring of aliens by enforcing an ordinance against the practice that had been on the books since 1925. The unnaturalized, after all, had to eat.

The anti-Curley majority on the council, indeed, feared any policies that centralized power in the Mayor's office. Consequently, the council decided on October 20, 1930, to upstage the Mayor by creating its own Special Committee on Unemployment, and a week later it asked Curley to provide places of registration for the jobless in all wards. The Mayor, instantly alert to changes that would give ward leaders more control, retorted that "no good cause would be served by advertising to the world that it was necessary to open up twenty-two separate places of registration for the unemployed of the city." The council requested that Curley direct officials to make municipal buildings available for use as sleeping quarters and urged him "to authorize the Overseers of the Public Welfare to serve food at such buildings during such emergency." Curley icily responded that an emergency condition did not obtain. Sounding more callous than he really was, Curley wanted to keep his own hands on the reins. But to the unemployed who would have to walk great distances to Hawkins Street, the debate must have appeared unseemly. Joblessness in Boston had become a political football.[25]

Despite mutual accusations, however, both Curley and the council were genuinely worried about the mounting welfare rolls. When the Mayor was forced to petition for a supplementary appropriation of nearly $1 million he was denounced as a profligate, but the councilors unanimously granted the extra funds. Similarly, the council turned with wrath on the Soldiers' Relief Department, charging that inconsistent rules compensated many veterans unjustly and compelled others "to come as paupers and beggars to the City of Boston."[26] The council advocated federal takeover of all payments to veterans, a step for which Curley was not prepared since federal money implied outside supervision over a department where his friends were safely ensconced. Despite the bitter recriminations, however, Boston's elderly and disabled soldiers received their stipends.

Curley and the city council also bickered over many aspects of welfare policy where the merits of their conflicting positions were anything but clear. The council, for example, scored Curley and the Overseers for their failure to adjust the scale of relief payments to the requirements of large families: the councilors voted an appropriation of $50,000 to be spent on shoes for the neediest welfare children so that they might attend elementary schools. Curley's city attorney held that municipal government possessed no such power, and he may well have been correct.[27] In defense of Curley, too, Boston spaced its welfare payments from $4 a week for a single person to $15 for a family with seven or more children. Thus it could be said that while the payments were surely not lavish, at least some attention had been devoted to family size. By the same token, the council berated the Wayfarers' Lodge for tolerating filth. "The pillows are black," a councilor asserted. "They should fumigate the building from top to bottom." Curley, in turn, wrote off the allegations to political frivolity. Here, too, there was some justice on both sides: the Wayfarers' Lodge was by no means mistakable for the

Ritz, but city-run institutions were not so bad that their lodgers were sleeping under newspapers for want of blankets, as was happening in Minneapolis. In Boston, at least, the Mayor and the city council were not at odds about whether there should be public welfare at all. Rather, the adversaries debated how the city could best run its program.[28]

The council and Mayor Curley also quarreled over the advisability of a public fund drive. In leading the fight to get Boston to resort to popular subscription for the benefit of the Public Welfare Department, Councilors Dowd and Clement Norton (Ward 18, Hyde Park) called upon city employees to contribute $1 million and assigned the business community a $2 million quota. The funds would be superintended by a committee appointed by the mayor consisting of industrial, commercial, and labor leaders accountable to Curley for the disbursement of the money. Congressman McCormack wired Dowd pledging support for the plan, and the council bought the proposal, noting that Cleveland had already raised $6 million and Chicago $12 million by public campaigns.

Curley, however, balked. He maintained that "the philanthropic element of the community . . . regardless of the promptings of heart and mind, are altogether too few and too poor to meet a situation of this character." In a letter to the council, Curley opposed the idea that city workers and employees of public-service corporations should donate any portion of their salaries to a fund for the unemployed. "Were the unfortunate required to wait for the collection of funds contributed by the charitable," said Curley, "the probability is that the money thus donated would be paid to an undertaker rather than to a purveyor of food." When, on November 17, the council again voted for a public fund drive Curley vetoed the proposal, scornfully pointing out that in a fifteen-day period, "the voluntary tender of . . . various industrial enterprises" amounted to precisely $770.02.[29]

The dispute over the fund drive had weighty political implications. If an organization of volunteers gained control of welfare money, power centralized in the mayor's office would be dissipated.

By advocating a relief campaign and by calling on the state legislature to provide money for the unemployed, Councilor Dowd and his allies intimated not very subtly that Curley had failed to develop constructive remedies. They compared him unfavorably to Mayor Walker of New York who had put large numbers to work on emergency street-repair projects. They praised fund drives in other cities, squabbled with Curley over whether breadlines did or did not exist in Boston, and pointed out that in spite of the Mayor's talk of massive public works, most had either failed to materialize or were too far off to be of use. Future projects, complained Councilman Wilson, "do not put coal in the cellar in the winter of 1930," and he predicted that without a fund drive Boston would witness the same spectacle as other cities, where "we now see on every corner men not selling apples but standing beside apples which they are trying to sell." [30]

The fund-drive controversy posed another vexing question, one which had begun to nag every urban government in the United States during the winter of 1930–1931: To what extent should municipal government run up deficits to finance relief? Boston had before it the example of Fall River, Massachusetts, which by July 1930 had found itself unable to pay its employees and a month later fell into the financial receivership of the state. Boston was acutely aware of Chicago's desperate circumstances where teachers went months without pay, a meager total of six thousand welfare recipients were averaging $9.09 per month, city and county workers were for a time compensated in tax anticipation scrip, and Mayor "Big Bill" Thompson suggested lotteries and Liberty Loans to raise money. From the standpoint of the Boston City Council, philanthropic donations would guarantee a continuation of relief payments and keep money out of Curley's hands as well. Furthermore, private gifts would enable the city to avert borrowing and reduce taxes. Curley, on the other hand, generally agreed with Congressman McCormack's view that government had been reducing debt too rapidly, thereby encouraging economic contraction rather than expansion. At heart, Curley was both a spender and a man who wanted no

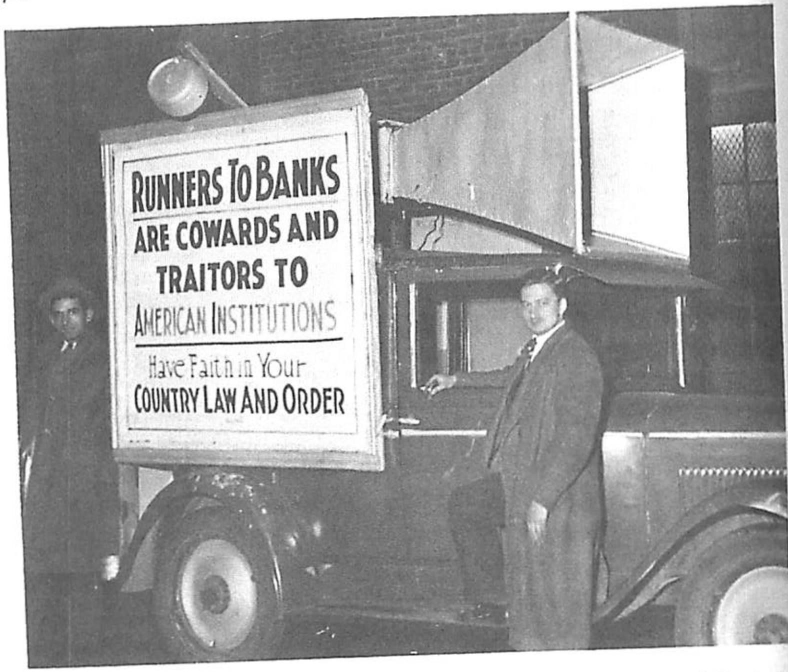
outsiders in control of welfare funds. While his motives may have been less than pristine, his brand of economics had much to recommend it. A city, after all, could for a time remain solvent while those who lived in its decaying neighborhoods had no work.

Far more than Curley, Governor Allen persisted in extolling the virtues of voluntarism. Piling committee on top of committee, Allen launched one of his most ambitious ventures of the year on October 26. Setting up an Emergency Committee on Unemployment Relief to act in consonance with President Hoover's recovery apparatus, Allen appointed James J. Phelan, a banker, to head a drive in Boston. Making "Shop Now for Christmas" appeals, the Allen-Phelan group also suggested that, as a way of creating jobs, railroads that entered Boston should electrify their lines. In addition, Allen and his committee endorsed the suggestion made by Colonel Arthur Woods, chairman of the President's Emergency Committee on Employment (PECE), that the unemployed could be helped if all Americans would "spruce up their homes" and if they would "make the little repairs that are needed." [31] Although Curley heeded Allen's request and formed a similar organization composed of fifty prominent men and women, the Mayor nevertheless reserved his warmest enthusiasm for the simultaneous announcement that he would seek a construction program costing $21,400,000, triple the authorization which he had been able to get from the state in 1930.

With the Allen approach to recovery not working, Democrats sniffed an opportunity to end Republican rule in the Commonwealth. But in settling on a candidate, Curley and a majority of the Democratic ward leaders carried their city council feud into state politics. In the gubernatorial primary, Curley backed his onetime enemy, "The Apostle of Sunshine," John F. Fitzgerald, and denounced Joseph B. Ely of Westfield, the choice of Martin Lomasney and Senator David I. Walsh. And when Curley accused Ely of being "an enemy of the Irish," nine Gaelic members of the city council rose to his defense. Curley, however, was undaunted. Even after Fitzgerald announced his withdrawal for reasons of health, Curley struggled to get write-in support for "Honey Fitz." The night before the primary, a fistfight erupted in a Boston radio studio between Curley and several Ely supporters who branded Curley a "bully, a bravo, a thug, a masquerading mayor, a moral and physical coward, a blackleg and a jailbird." Curley returned the insult by calling the State Democratic Chairman "the lowest, meanest, most despicable person" he had ever known, a man who resembled the Biblical figure who "went down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among thieves." Ely won the primary, but it took a visit to Boston on October 28 by Al Smith to patch up even temporarily the ruffled feelings left over from the September imbroglio. At that, few political cognoscenti were fooled by Smith's emotional reception, Fitzgerald's matchless rendering of "Sweet Adeline," and the presence of Ely, Walsh, and Curley on the same platform.[32]

In the 1930 election, Ely bested Governor Allen, but neither his 16,000-vote edge across the state nor his margin of 76,000 in Boston could be termed stunning. Indeed, the Democratic gubernatorial candidate in 1928 had carried the Hub by 91,000 votes. Although the electorate also turned out United States Senator William Butler, the conservative Republican's endorsement of Prohibition, his unpopularity with organized labor, and his tendency to be "as magnetic as a clam," made him an easy target for the unexciting Yankee Democrat from Fitchburg, Marcus Aurelius ("Mute Marcus") Coolidge. Massachusetts now had two Democrats in the Senate, and both were linked to Curley's opponents. While the party narrowed the lopsided Republican margin in the lower chamber of the state legislature from 155-85 to 139-100, and though Democrats swept all major offices except the post of lieutenant governor, the turnover was not especially impressive. After years of Republican rule on Beacon Hill, explained Henry Shattuck to a friend, "a number of barnacles are sure to be accumulated," and listless campaigning hurt the atrophied party. So, too, did Prohibition: in the November 1930 referendum on the state's Baby Volstead Act, Boston voters rejected enforcement of the Eighteenth Amendment by more than three to one. And after the mayor of Boston, England, had left the Hub's tercentenary celebration, he told his friends: "You can swim in liquor there. You can drown yourself in it."[33] Whether Ely's condemnation of Allen for failing to disinter the emergency measures used in Massachusetts during World War I also registered with Bostonians is less clear. Having waged a negative campaign whose purpose had been largely "to protest, to reject, [and] to condemn" the party in power, Democrats exploited economic conditions but declined to elucidate coherent alternatives. The electorate had, in fact, traded one moderate-to-conservative set of officials for another, and in the process the fissure within Boston's Democratic party had widened.

During the first Depression year, several of the city's pre-crash characteristics had been brought into sharper outline. Boston had retained its ability to raise more revenue per capita and make larger welfare allotments than any other major city. Yet the relative insularity which this favored position allowed the city's leadership had to some extent dulled the capacity to make further progress. Taxpayers' organizations and the Chamber of Commerce had served notice that they would not go along with the Mayor's construction program for 1931, and ward bosses who for years had been on the outs with Curley displayed an eagerness to thwart the city's chief executive. Republican control of the Massachusetts legislature held firm, and the state had frustrated Curley's plans to speed public-works projects for the unemployed. Moreover, the new Democratic governor was on the outs with the Mayor of Boston. Prospects were therefore bleak that future relationships between City Hall and Beacon Hill would be much better than when Frank Allen had occupied the governor's chair. Although the question of whether or not the chronically poor should be supported by the Department of Public Welfare was not deemed a fit topic for debate, the will to finance indefinitely a soaring relief roster populated by the able-bodied unemployed was by no means assured: James Michael Curley believed that government had a responsibility to the jobless, but his enemies were not so certain. Curley's opponents, more than the Mayor himself, were pushing for decentralization of relief, and they saw that voluntary donations might serve their purposes well. And even as

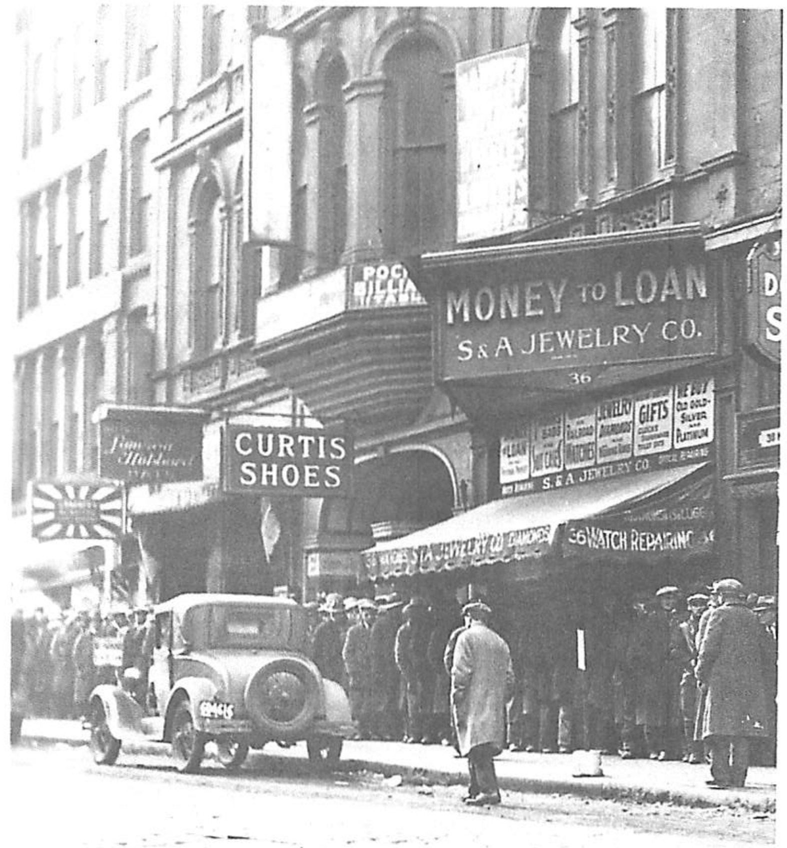


A run on the Federal National Bank and the Boston-Continental Bank in December 1931 prompted a Roxbury theatre to dispatch this sound truck. Bostonians were urged to keep the faith. Boston University School of Communications.

Curley was reaching an impasse with the city council over how to finance and administer the welfare department most effectively, the Mayor was also discovering that his proposals for national planning and federal expenditures were generally being greeted either by silence or by derision. The spirit of self-reliance lived on among Boston's articulate elites, and a mayor whose motives were so widely suspected as were Curley's stood little chance of inspiring a broader sense of community.

Meanwhile, the city's poor eyed the deadlocks at City Hall, the municipal-state hostility, and the promises that were being made by Boston's notables. By the end of the year, only a subway extension at Governor's Square was furnishing emergency employment of any

consequence despite the Mayor's boasts to the contrary. When the city's wealthy were asked to hire unemployed women to Christmas shop for them at 40 cents an hour, two hundred jobless showed up at a private emergency employment center at noon of the first registration day. "Pitiful in the extreme were some of their stories," the



New Year's Day, 1931. A throng of jobless men wedged close to buildings on Hanover Street wait for free meals. Nevertheless, Mayor Curley repeatedly denied that breadlines existed in Boston. Boston University School of Communications.

Mayor Curley and his son, George, break ground for a new Governor's Square tunnel. Curley, a monumental builder, preferred to make funds available to the unemployed through public works projects rather than voluntary philanthropy programs or the government dole. The *Boston Globe*.

Transcript reported, yet precisely four were placed.[34] Students at the Boston University School of Theology gave up a day's meal to raise a hundred dollars for the unemployed, but sums of this dimension must have seemed a mockery to the city's nine hundred cigar workers who wandered the streets looking for work.

What had been styled a "recession" at the time of Mayor Curley's inauguration had deepened into a depression, and the costs were evident in Boston through most of the year. At Christmastime the Mayor helped the Volunteers of America fit 1,600 poverty-stricken children with shoes. Manfully predicting a prosperous future, he continued to debate with his opponents—and even with himself—how a revival was to be accomplished. To the 11,000 families who depended on the municipal welfare department for their winter fuel, the need for an answer was fast becoming imperative.

4

"Build Now! Buy Now!"—Unemployment and Persistent Voluntarism, 1931–1932

On October 16, 1932, Harvard's Felix Frankfurter crossed the Charles River, addressed the Associated Jewish Philanthropies of Boston, and declared that the word "charity" had become obsolete. The entire social structure of America, he said, teetered on the brink of collapse:

> I think that the historian of the future will find new words behind the initials B.C. and A.D. I think they will connote, in addition to the great sacred weight those initials now carry, Before Crash and After Depression. For, ladies and gentlemen, I think we are in the midst of a social transformation.[1]

If, in 1930, Boston—like other American cities—rehearsed for the Great Depression, in 1931 and 1932 it was engaged in a more serious drama. Many of the lines spoken by Boston's leaders were unchanged; others were modified. Municipal government reacted to widespread unemployment by once again calling into question the old shibboleths about local responsibility and the adequacy of voluntary efforts, yet the sluggish response of state and federal government forced the city to look once again to its own resources. The city had to improvise, but improvisation alone could not put the idle