

BY NEAL PEIRCE AND CURTIS JOHNSON

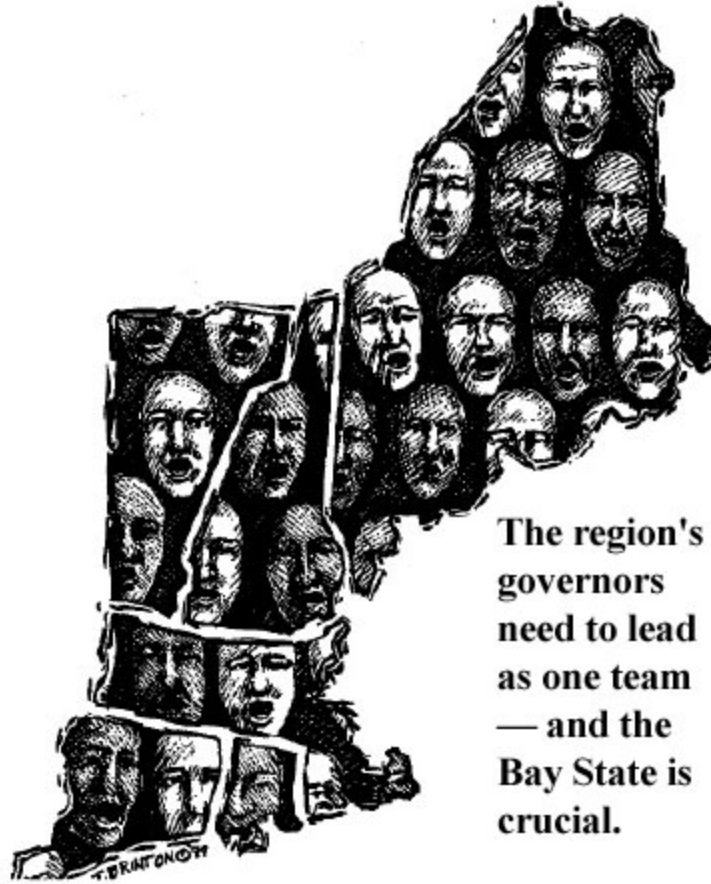
## A call to action for New England's governors

WILL THE DEMOCRATS take control of Congress? Can the Bush administration recover any momentum? Who are early picks for the 2008 presidential elections?

The election punditry is intriguing. But New Englanders should watch out. For their lives and fortunes, the gubernatorial elections in November, in all six states, may be even more important. And the most critical single decision may be the Massachusetts governor's race.

Massachusetts is the linchpin of New England -- its economic, geographic, population, and political center. Thoughtful leaders and good team players in the other five states are important, but unless there is a strong team leader as governor in Massachusetts, the region may be unable to face some of the toughest challenges of its history.

The perils are hidden in plain sight. The seedbed of a nation is now an old blue corner, the six states mustering fewer people than Florida alone. Massachusetts and Rhode Island are losing total population -- a rarity in today's America and a red flag for employers. Youth are fleeing to other parts of America. The region is aging rapidly -- Maine is soon to be America's oldest state. Major New England corporations sell out and aren't replaced. Scarcely any firms (except occasional catches in the hot biotechnology sector) consider moving in. Acute problems range from excessive housing costs to thickets of inhibiting state and local regulations. National clout? Sure, Senator Edward



The region's  
governors  
need to lead  
as one team  
— and the  
Bay State is  
crucial.

Tim Brinton Illustration

Kennedy is likely to retain his seat this year, though insiders shudder at New England's dissolving Washington influence when he retires. Even a Democratic president wouldn't help much; any national administration is likely to be preoccupied by foreign turmoil, terror threats, and oceans of deepening debt.

If there's hope, it's smart self-help. Five promising areas emerged from our

extended interviews of hundreds of leaders and civic activists as part of a New England Futures project. Each potential is matched to a threat. But each opportunity depends on New England's governors taking the offense -- leading as one, unified New England team rather than six disparate, weak players.

**Energy:** New England is at the end of the pipelines. It faces alarming price

spikes, soaring winter heating costs, and clouds over natural gas supplies. Its electric rates are 36 percent over the US average. We found a multitude of cutting-edge experiments being pushed by New England nonprofits, corporations, local governments, universities, and architect-builders. But if the governors came together to celebrate the start-ups and envision regionwide expansion -- if they focused not just on greenhouse gas initiatives but on dramatic conservation steps, stimulating and coordinating new systems like wind and biofuels -- progress could come much more rapidly. A less fossil-fuel dependent New England could circulate internally (instead of exporting) billions of energy dollars each year -- a critical step back toward competitiveness.

**Growth:** Loss of youth, sky-high housing costs, and generic subdivisions and McMansions obliterating New England's signature townscapes and open countryside -- they're part of a single puzzle. New England's governors need to unite in championing the idea that all towns and cities should welcome all classes and income groups. Today's exclusive communities are bad news for employers hiring workers, for workers forced into long commutes, and for roads unnecessarily congested. The credibility of state leadership could also be critical in setting new goals -- strategies to overcome property-tax-based local opposition to affordable housing, to promote regional compacts for transit-oriented development, to protect the integrity of New England's trademark historic towns, and to channel more development to older cities.

**Transportation:** New England seems frozen in time and space, the six states responding weakly, if at all, even as waves of big-truck traffic clog its interstates, passenger train service languishes, rail freight dwindles, and nothing is done about port capacity for the biggest new container ships. While 14 nations invest robustly in high-speed rail at up to 210 miles per hour, New England and its Mid-Atlantic neighbors dawdle, praying Amtrak won't die. Where's the 21st-century plan for smart intermodal links among New England's airports, roads, railroads, and water transportation? Experts can create blueprints, but it takes governors to set a regional vision.

**Higher education:** New England's universities -- its historic ace card -- are a huge asset. The top-tier universities look secure. But the region's higher-education sector as a whole is wracked by inflating costs, losing the influx of foreign students that provided cash infusions in the '90s, and very slow to adjust to online competition from the likes of the University of Phoenix. Too few New England high school graduates are competent in math and science, even as shortages of scientists, engineers, information technology, and healthcare professionals loom. One possible solution: a new intermediary -- call it Opportunity New England, or ONE, and advertise it at home and nationally. It would provide online higher-ed information and telephone consultation service to let students focus on their needs as education consumers, creating blended on-campus and online courses of study, rather than simply responding to preset college curriculums. The New England

Board of Higher Education could lead this first-in-America innovation, but support from the governors could spark the excitement to make the launch successful.

**Health:** New England is a mecca of medical care, famed hospitals and labs, and now bioscience inventions. Healthcare workers are 11 percent of the workforce -- the highest in America. But does all the medical attention make New Englanders truly healthier? The answer is clearly no. All the attention is going into broadening health insurance coverage for New Englanders. But to curb numbing costs and achieve better health, another Rx has to be filled -- a New England-wide agenda to make consumers cohealers with their doctors, to publicize

computer-based scorecards on hospitals and clinics' results, and to push for healthier lifestyles. Perhaps the states could petition Washington for a six-state Medicaid waiver to show that a major focus on public health, radically improved electronic information systems, and a deliberate system of community-based primary care can boost health outcomes and moderate spiraling health system costs.

Are these strategies precisely the right ones? We don't claim so; experts in this proverbial "smart" part of America may suggest better ones. But what New England better not do -- unless it's willing to see its incomes, environment, health, and quality of life decline precipitously -- is sit on its hands. Of course New England's business sector,

universities, legislatures, and nonprofits must be part of the leadership cadre. But at the end of the day, only governors have the popular mandate, the cache, the recognition, and respect to get agendas moving quickly and clearly.

There is precedent for New England governors collaborating. Just last year they unified to stop the disastrous set of base closings and shipyard shifts pushed by the Pentagon. But putting out fires isn't sufficient. New England needs to think ahead. The New England Governors Association meets just a couple times a year. It devotes a few scarce hours to the array of serious policy challenges the region faces. It has no policy staff. Governor Mitt Romney withdrew Massachusetts as a

member, ostensibly to save \$212,000 in annual dues. Today's New England can't hold a candle to the Western Governors Association, active on every front from forest health to high technology. Or to the Southern Growth Policy Board, founded by that region's governors in 1971 to focus regional collaboration on challenges. Or to the unity of the Midwestern governors, who recently agreed to invest \$20 billion to clean up Great Lakes pollution and other threats, and to work with Canadian premiers to control export of water from the region.

At a moment of peril, New England needs governors just as imaginative. That's why voters in Massachusetts, the lead state, and in the region's other states need to think carefully. Does a

candidate have what it takes to think in fresh, creative ways? And will he or she promise to join collaboratively with the other governors in one Team New England that can give these six states a fighting chance to survive and excel in difficult times?

*Neal Peirce and Curtis Johnson of the Citistates Group writer team have delved into New England's challenges as part of a New England Futures project, with findings at [www.newenglandfutures.org](http://www.newenglandfutures.org).*

© Copyright 2006 Globe Newspaper Company.