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Lost weekend

Apathy! Smugness! Dysfunction! The Massachusetts

Democrats take Lowell.

BY ADAM REILLY

RUMOR IS, the 2005 Massachusetts Democratic Party Platform Convention was about ideas. And if you weren't in Lowell last weekend, you just might believe it. After all, the Democrats were getting together to revamp their party

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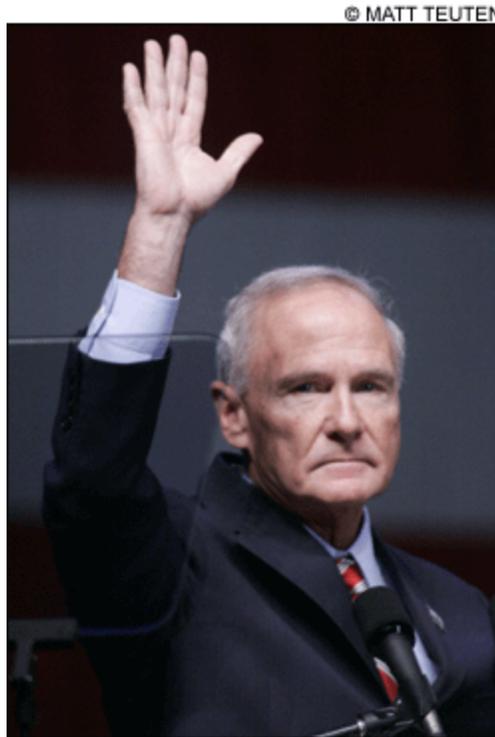
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platform — and when they were done, they had a cutting-edge manifesto that endorses gay marriage and stem-cell research and condemns Social Security privatization.

Trouble is, calling what happened in Lowell a "platform convention" suggests a focus and a passion that were largely absent. True, there were optional "breakout sessions" where sundry issues were discussed in small groups. But the delegates didn't turn their collective attention to the platform ("our covenant with one another ... the foundation on which our party leaders and we generally stand") until Saturday afternoon, about an hour before everyone went home. And when they did — despite abiding Democratic disagreement on issues like gay marriage, abortion, and taxes — there was a total lack of debate. As the platform sailed through, Thomas Hill, the chair of the Marlborough Democratic



SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT: the two official candidates for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination -- Tom Reilly, above, and Deval Patrick, below right -- both gave speeches that helped leaven the convention's monotony.



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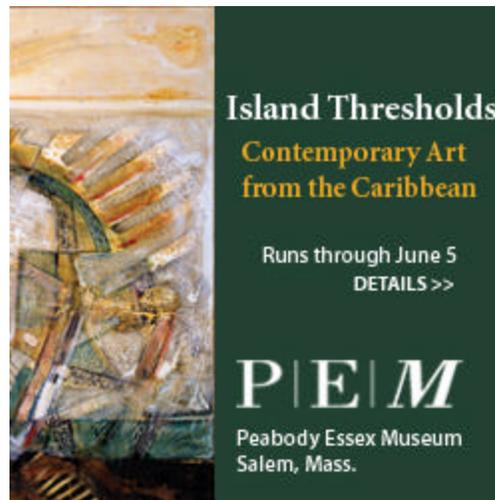


Committee, waxed nostalgic. "These issue conventions are not really strong like they used to be," Hill said. "We used to go to five o'clock in the '80s, and argue. Here we are at half-past one, and half of the crowd is gone."

Things might have been different if Senator John Kerry or Congressman Stephen Lynch, both of whom recently objected to the state party's support for gay marriage, had shown up to make their case to the delegates. But Kerry was at a family wedding, and Lynch had a niece graduating from college. Senate president Robert Travaglini and House Speaker Sal DiMasi might have livened things up, too, since DiMasi supports gay marriage and Travaglini prefers civil unions. But Travaglini was still in the hospital recovering from surgery, and DiMasi had previously scheduled family obligations. In fact, of the 160 members of the state legislature, no more than two dozen showed up; of those, half seemed to be running for some other office.

IF THE DEARTH of local Democratic bigwigs dampened any urge to debate core Democratic principles, the convention's schedule didn't help matters. By the time the delegates got a chance to publicly weigh in on the platform, their collective energy had been sapped by early-evening cocktail receptions; an ice-cream social (in honor of state senator and would-be Middlesex district attorney Jarrett Barrios); a host-committee party (sponsored in part by Congressman Marty Meehan); a late-night cocktail reception (courtesy of lieutenant-governor hopeful Sam Kelley); assorted late-night high jinks; and a breakfast tribute to Ted Kennedy early Saturday morning. These extracurriculars were not without value: in addition to free food, they offered chances to watch the politically ambitious — from untested lieutenant-governor aspirant Deborah Goldberg to Barrios to Congressman Mike Capuano, who may or may not be running for governor — try out their stump speeches. They also served as a reminder that local politics can be a lot like junior-high school, with telltale signs of who likes whom (which stickers are on whose shirt? which people are standing close together? which parties got the A-list guests?) as meaningful as anything anyone says or does.

When the delegates finally ventured into the dusky gloom of



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Tsongas Arena, they were treated to still more speeches — which, as morning gave way to afternoon, blurred into a kind of vague, undifferentiated blue-state mass. How can this be, you may ask — especially with liberal lion Ted Kennedy and presidential ranter-turned-Democratic National Committee chair Howard Dean in the house? Here's how: with precious few exceptions, the speakers stuck to a few stock talking points that were repeated ad nauseam; after a while, they sounded like the droning, incomprehensible adults of the old *Peanuts* TV cartoons. Here, in no particular order, are the ideas that took center stage in Lowell:

- 1) Republicans suck.
- 2) This means you, Mitt Romney.
- 3) Democrats rule!
- 4) Ted Kennedy *totally* rules. (Note: Ted Kennedy skipped this one.)
- 5) Still, Democrats should play nice during the gubernatorial primary.

Fortunately, three widely anticipated speeches — by Deval Patrick, Tom Reilly, and William Galvin — helped leaven the monotony. Patrick and Reilly are officially running for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination, while Galvin is a probable but still unofficial candidate. (For more on Patrick, Reilly, and Galvin, see, respectively, "[The Deval Patrick Show](#)," News and Features, January 28; "[Premature Great Expectations](#)," News and Features, January 21; and "[Waiting Game](#)," News and Features, March 4.) On Saturday morning, Patrick made his now-familiar call for a politics of hope the centerpiece of a strong speech that got a standing ovation. Reilly — whose poll numbers and fundraising totals far exceed Patrick's, but who suffers from a perceived charisma deficit — was unexpectedly vigorous, and received some enthusiastic applause of his own.

Galvin fared less well. In a speech that hinted at the best and worst aspects of populism, Galvin made his own fight against the recent Gillette merger the centerpiece of a broader riff on corporate malfeasance. Then he took a swipe at Patrick, bragging that, as a Massachusetts native, he doesn't need advisers to tell him about the issues facing the state. (Unlike Reilly and Galvin, Patrick was born in Illinois.) Of the three, Galvin clearly got the poorest response. But given his relatively conservative politics, the generally liberal make-up of Democratic state conventions, and the underrepresentation of party insiders at this particular convention, this was hardly a surprise.

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