

*Sunday Rutland Herald*

Article published Mar 4, 2007

## **At town meeting, Vermonters learn how to agree to disagree**

Those of us who know town meeting best enjoy telling its stories; feisty debates, fascinating characters – humorous moments and funny episodes that reflect the lighter side of the human condition. One of my favorites:

"The story is told of the town meeting in northern Vermont in which someone proposed the following resolution during the 'new business' article: 'The town wishes to extend its sympathy to Wayne Wheeler, whose barn recently burned only three weeks after Skidway Brook flooded and destroyed his corn piece. Wayne continued to perform his duties as selectman during this horrible personal crisis, and for that the town its deeply grateful.'

Whereupon someone yelled out from the back of the hall, 'Call for a secret ballot!'"

And there are stories that we tell carefully because they scare us; hard moments when the raw honesty of face-to-face democracy reveals, not Lincoln's "better angels of our nature," but the dark side – anger or stupidly or raw selfishness.

Still, beyond these extremes there resides something in town meeting as solid and enduring as the hard scabble hills in which it is found. It is a gift from the heart, the heart of town meeting.

Civility.

No one has better explained it than Charles Edward Crane in his classic "Winter in Vermont" published in 1942.

Listen to his words:

"I've seen men almost come to blows at town meeting. Personalities would crop up and wounding remarks be made. They hurt, and may hurt for a long time, but the rule is to forgive and forget quickly, for we small-towners live so close together that we are sure to come face-to-face almost every day, and after town meeting and an occasional blizzard, spring begins to suggest

itself, and hard feelings melt."

Writing on the defection of Sen. Jim Jeffords from the Republican Party in the spring of 2001, Jon Margolis described an essential corollary of Crane's insight in an article in U.S. News and World Report called "As Vermont Goes, So Goes ... Vermont": Jeffords' actions, said Margolis, should be seen not as a measure of how much the typical Vermonter cherishes individualism (emphasis mine) but rather "as evidence of the persistence of an old tradition and how much Jeffords and Vermont still depend on it [an] attitude that cherishes restraint, civility, tolerance, and compromise." In New England, says Margolis, one finds an "implicit acknowledgement that one might be wrong" (again emphasis mine).

Town meeting is an institution where people tend not to act on their intolerant orientations. Attend town meeting with any consistency and one cannot help but learn forbearance in the face of other's intolerance towards you and conversely your own potential intolerance towards others.

The playwright Jonathan Miller wrote that in order for a relationship to be humane (thus civil), it must be complicated and dutiful. Complication and duty in interpersonal relations are products of intimacy and intimacy is a product of small size and small size gives birth to the critical human virtue of forbearance. If town meeting teaches anything, it is how to suffer damn fools. And to appreciate the fact that from time to time you too may look like a damn fool in the eyes of people as good as yourself.

The political philosopher Russell Hanson provides the logic that ties all this to town meeting. While we cannot exorcise intolerance from the human soul, says Hanson, we can create institutions that insure forbearance in the face of intolerance.

Town meeting is the quintessential form of such an institution. It instills (over time) civility, which is simply forbearance (and its consequence, tolerance) in the practice of politics.

And there is strong evidence that the incessant practice of town meeting democracy year after year over two and half centuries in Vermont has produced the most civil society in America today. As I noted in my book "Real Democracy," Harvard's Robert Putnam scores Vermont first among the 50 states on his tolerance index and third on his social capital index. Moreover the Rice-Shumberg study "Civic Culture and Government Performance in the American States" finds Vermont by far the strongest American state on civil society.

Importantly, the New England states, the only states in America that practice town meeting, are found in profoundly disproportionate numbers in these rankings of civic culture.

Thomas Jefferson said that town meeting was fundamentally a schoolhouse of citizenship. DeTocqueville, in *Democracy in America*, said that "town meetings are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they bring it within the people's reach, they teach (citizens) how to use and enjoy it." Yale's president Timothy Dwight wrote about the same time "in these little schools (town meetings) citizens commence their apprenticeship to public life." John Fiske in his classic *Civil Government of the United States* said town meeting is "the most complete democracy in the world ... in the kind of discussion which it provokes, in the necessity of facing argument with argument and of keeping one's temper under control, the town meeting is the best training school in existence."

Of all the many reasons we should watch over and protect and indeed strengthen our town meetings, perhaps this is the most critical: Like it or not, we in New England and especially in Vermont are keepers of a sacred flame.

Democracy. Not pure. But real.

Some day (and it cannot be too soon) America will grow tired of its mass, centralized, inhumane and embittered political processes. And it will look northward to the high hills of its first and enduring homeland and find in Vermont a light to guide it out of the darkness.

Town meeting.

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