



Photograph by Tully Teller

**By KEVIN GODDARD**



**F**IRST OF ALL, let's take the capital letters out of Town Meeting. Let's forget all of that lofty stuff we've heard and read — and yes, perhaps, come to believe — about this ritual of early spring being the last bastion of grass roots democracy. That may or may not be true, but it's clear that Town Meeting — that is, town meeting — would exist in Vermont even if there were no boards of selectmen to elect, no burdensome school budgets to debate, no hapless road commissioners to badger, no town business to conduct.

Town meeting is an institution, but the formal work that occurs there is only one small part of the package. To understand the broader implications, you've got to put it in context. And the overriding context of Vermont town meeting is that it's winter.

Why else would the first Tuesday in March be embraced with such universal, almost child-like anticipation across the state? Because there are town spending plans to approve? Because there are local officials to elect? Hardly. It is that first glimpse of the light at the end of the long tunnel of winter that brings Vermonters from their homes — still booted against the cold earth and hard-handed from their stovewood — to congregate again in town halls and schoolhouses, to reacquaint themselves with their friends and neighbors and celebrate the knowledge that spring, if not quite at hand, is at least part of the foreseeable future.

So town meeting has survived. It has both changed and stayed pretty much the same — providing Vermonters with an occasion to come together at the end of winter to talk about the weather, to talk about their families, to talk about their

**TOWN MEETING DEBATE**

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*Is our most famous political institution bright and bouncy?*

[👉 Or, 👈]

*down for the count?*

**By FRANK BRYAN**



**T**HINGS WERE GOING SMOOTHLY at the Starksboro Town Meeting. Too smoothly. One after another the usual list of out-of-town requests for small amounts of money to fund public services for the region were being approved. I was voting "aye" along with every one else when it struck me. If this keeps up, we'll be out of here by noon. Where was the debate, the skepticism Vermonters are known for?

What was needed was a little strategic cussedness.

"No," I guffed on the next item, a call for a few hundred dollars to help support a dental clinic. Several others must have sensed the danger of creeping benevolence along with me and voted no, too. The "yea" forces, lulled by success, had managed only a perfunctory murmur and the moderator called for a standing count.

Oh m'god.  
Dilemma: should I retreat into cowardly silence and stare at the floor — or rise grandly and vote for tooth decay?

OH M'GOD!  
"All those in favor, please stand," intoned the moderator. My wife Melissa's eyes twinkled her most delightful "now what are you going to do smarty?" as she rose (along with nearly everyone else in the hall) to cast her vote in the affirmative.

As the count went on, my mind raced ahead. There is safety in numbers. Wouldn't the moderator see that the ayes clearly had it? Why waste time with a count of "no's." I wanted to yell triumphantly, "Stop the count! Stop the count! The ayes have it!"

"All those opposed," said the moderator. Standing before my fellow townspeople for the cause of plaque, cavities, and root

 **KEVIN GODDARD**

troubles and their pleasures and their hopes and fears and ambitions. And, of course, to take care of business in between the chatter.

In a way, it is the one thing that has remained constant about town meeting — the talk — that has made possible the most noticeable change in this venerable old institution. Folks still talk. Only now, the subject matter has changed.

Several years ago, much of the talk at town meetings across Vermont was about the nuclear arms race. Make that Nuclear Arms Race, because the talk was serious. Images of global destruction make for a more sober discussion than, say, chances of a bumper maple crop or anecdotes about the latest goings-on in that other seasonal, ritualistic coming together of Vermonters, the annual session of the state Legislature.

About that same time, some folks began complaining that town meeting — the complainers almost always referred to it as Town Meeting — was being corrupted, perverted, or otherwise altered in ways that were violating its centuries-old traditions. So the 1980s have spawned a lingering debate about town meeting and about what should or should not be discussed there.

Basically, there are two separate and distinct camps. In one are the folks who say town meeting isn't what it used to be, that it is losing its democratic spirit and being converted into a soapbox for liberal-minded activists promoting this cause or that. In the other are the activists and their supporters, who



 **FRANK BRYAN**

canals, I looked around me and gained a new appreciation for two words: "minority" and "chagrined." I had also confirmed in one fell swoop the very worst suspicions of my friends and neighbors: He *is* to the right of Genghis Khan.

"Why do folks live in the hills?" asked George Aiken in *Speaking from Vermont*. The reason, he said, is "that some folks just naturally love the mountains and like to live up among them where freedom of thought and action is logical and inherent." In the teeth of the Depression, Aiken was confronting a scheme by the Resettlement Administration to identify submarginal land (not fit for human habitation) and then transfer the people out and turn the land over to federal control. How much of Vermont had been deemed submarginal? Fifty-five percent! Aiken ends Chapter II (entitled "Not So Submarginal") with an incandescent paragraph that stands to my way of thinking as one of the simplest, most beautiful and honest testimonials ever given Vermont:

*I look off to the east and see Mount Monadnock rearing its peak through the clouds. Tonight the lights of the neighbors' houses twinkle in friendliness and neighborliness from a dozen locations. Some of these neighboring houses are better than mine, some of them not quite so good. None of us would willingly move away.*

Near the end of his life, Aiken was interviewed by George Herman of CBS for a special program on town meeting which served as the lead story for Charles Kuralt's "Sunday Morning." He said one of the sadnesses of his later years was watching what was happening to town meeting. It wasn't what it used to be, he said. It seemed to be dying.

There is a lesson to be learned from this. It is contained in

contend that town meeting is a perfectly legitimate time and place to discuss issues of importance — whether they be local, national or global in scope — and to take community positions on these issues.

There are those who will tell you that they can generally predict who will be in which camp. They say that native or long-time Vermonters — some go so far as to call these people "Real Vermonters," although that raises the question of what an "Unreal Vermonter" might be — dislike the direction that town meeting is taking and are beginning to pass up the annual event. And they say that transplants — flatlanders and gentlemen farmers who came to Vermont from somewhere else — are the ones who are turning town meeting into a carnival of international affairs discussions.

Of course, such generalities are seldom fair, and they also are seldom useful or accurate. That small bit of wisdom was demonstrated to me on the very town meeting day that spawned this ongoing debate.

As a reporter for United Press International, I was covering the town meeting in what then was my own hometown — Brookfield, a scenic, rural community in the rolling hills of Orange County. Early in the meeting I focused on two people who, I felt, probably would be useful in humanizing the debate and providing a clear portrayal of the meeting. One was a young mother; with her long, flowing skirt and braided hair, she was almost certain, I thought, to support a resolution calling for a bilateral freeze in the production of new nuclear weapons. The

a metaphor. Town meeting is the hill farm of our governance. George Aiken loved them both and, I suspect, for the same reason. They are both human-scale operations. Now they are disappearing together and, again, for the same reasons. Progress has been defined as bigness, speed, efficiency. Neither the hill farm nor town meeting fits the definition. The imperatives of mass culture are working at them like sun on the frost of a south-side pasture.

The heart of town meeting is face-to-face decision-making. Without that, what is left *may* be called town meeting, but it won't be — any more than a summer home, with its out-buildings intact and stone walls repaired to accent the ambience, is a hill farm. Both will become cosmetic trappings for a culture more interested in appearance than substance.

Town meeting is an institution where people come together to *resolve* issues, where they can see, firsthand, policy being made and can participate in the process. Without the potential to decide things, important things that affect their lives directly and immediately, town meeting loses the energy that sustains it. For its life-blood is politics, and politics deals with genuine gains and losses.

The essential question is, then, whether town meetings can be preserved as law-making institutions which allow people to exercise real power in policy they have fashioned in real time for themselves, policy for which they have no one to blame but themselves if it goes astray. As humans are less than perfect, so too will their town meetings be imperfect. Their perfection resides in our enduring patience with their imperfections. Could we ask for more from any political institution that is not directed by a benign presence? Perhaps it is as Winston Churchill said about democracy. It is "... the worst form of government in the world except for all the other forms (of government)."

 **KEVIN GODDARD**

other person was an older woman, her gray hair wrapped in a bun. She knitted quietly as she listened to the speakers that day, and I figured here, for sure, was a long-time Vermonter. And a certain no-vote for the nuclear freeze resolution.

I was wrong. As it turned out, young mother picked up her child and left after Brookfield's school budget passed that day. But old-time Vermont stayed on to the bitter end and helped put my central Vermont community on record in favor of an immediate halt in the production of new atomic weapons. Scores and scores of Vermont communities approved the "freeze" resolution that day, bringing national attention to the arms freeze movement. I had to figure there were some real Vermonters among the voters who sent that resounding message to the rest of the country.

Which brings us back to a central point. Town meeting *has* changed — it would be naive to argue otherwise. But what hasn't? The changes that have occurred have kept the tradition from becoming nothing more than an anachronism. They have provided the freshness and vitality town meeting needs to stay alive.

Town Meeting has changed because Vermont has changed, and Vermont has changed because Vermonters have changed. Like that elderly woman in Brookfield, some folks now believe that issues of global scope are as important to their lives in Vermont as the mechanics of their village governments.

There are others who wish it wasn't so. It is easy to be nostalgic about Vermont because much of the state appears rooted in a simpler time. Vermont is still a place of quiet evenings and quieting views, of misty hillsides, country roads and curling woodsmoke.

But the state is more than a postcard. And its people are not quite the simple-minded folk that they are frequently portrayed as being. Vermont may be — as is so often suggested — a special place, but it is neither insulated nor isolated from what occurs outside its folksy borders.

So it seems only natural that when the state's winter-weary people come together on that first Tuesday each March to talk about their homes, schools and communities, they also talk about their country and their world. It is these discussions that keep town meeting alive — without them, the institution would live on only in the history books and the museums.

Vermonters are lucky. Not only do they have a healthy concern about the future of their towns and their world, but they also have a forum to air these concerns and a vehicle to make their voices heard. It occurs early each March, about the time folks begin looking toward spring. It is distinctive, perhaps unique in Vermont. And it is called Town Meeting — with a capital T and a capital M.

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 **FRANK BRYAN**

In 1958 John Guy La Plante entitled his article in the *Nation* "What Killed the Town Meeting?" and in his history of Vermont, published in 1981, Charles T. Morrissey states "Town Halls in the villages are symbols of local autonomy, but town meetings are more ritualistic than effective as instruments of government."

To us town meeting diehards, "them is fightin' words." But it does little good to bristle with indignation.

Though I am far from ready to count town meeting out, these accounts are more right than wrong, and if town meeting is to be saved, it must be done now, at the 11th hour.

Town meeting is in trouble because the town — heartland of our democracy in Vermont — is in trouble. Each season's passing has found the town with less power and the townspeople with less opportunity to decide the matters that affect their lives. It is often hard to make this point because town authority has already been lost to at least one generation's memory. So many of those who still tout the health of town meeting were simply not present when the institution was red-blooded. They have no *sense* of it. The loss of town powers is so clear that a listing is not needed. An example best illustrates the point.

About fifteen years ago a young man in Newbury wandered into town meeting during the debate over whether or not heifers (unbred replacement stock for dairy farms) should be taxed as property. He was a man of steely blue eyes, broad at the shoulders, narrow at the hips. His pickup truck was always equipped with beer, a 30-30 in the window and a bumper sticker that read: "If you outlaw guns, only outlaws will have guns." Call him Bill. He dropped out of school in the eighth grade and began to cut pulp for a living. He lived in a trailer because his parents had sold the home place to summer people.

Bill worked on construction until deer season and raised heifers behind his trailer. He was a political outcast. Politics was for "them," not him.

I was the one who told Bill to sit down and listen to the debate on whether or not to tax heifers; this only to keep him quiet because he had stood next to me and was talking loudly. He listened. Then he voted. But first he went out to the parking lot and brought in three others to join him. It took awhile for the vote to be counted, but when it was, the motion not to tax heifers passed by two.

Meet Bill. Citizen. It didn't take a college professor to convince him it was important to participate in the political system. Bill saw it happen. No wait. No excuses. No promises. Just lawmaking, pure and simple. Thomas Jefferson had Bill in mind when he said that town meeting was "the wisest invention ever devised by the wit of man for the perfect exercise of self-government," primarily because it was a "school of citizenship."

A year later the towns lost their authority to decide whether or not to include heifers as property for tax purposes.

As the towns themselves have lost power, the town meeting has lost influence within the context of the town. Take the office of road commissioner, for instance. We used to elect our road commissioner on the spot. Then the state told us to vote on whether or not to have the road commissioner appointed by the selectmen. Then came the state directive that the selectmen would appoint *unless* we voted to elect. Result? Very few town meetings elect the road commissioner any more. The state simply wore them down. The office of road commissioner, a democratic institution, has been transformed into a foreman's position. The people who are judged capable by many to advise presidents on foreign policy are not deemed capable, it seems, of judging the quality of their own roads.

But there is more, much more. We have fragmented our



Photograph by Jon Gilbert Fox

*Strafford Town Meeting.*



communities so that town boundaries and social structure no longer mesh. We have separated our school meetings from our town meetings — to the delight of the educational establishment. We have regionalized services so that many items on town warnings are lost in a fog of misplaced accountability and responsibility. We have bundled our towns into legislative districts and then switched bundles again and again, further diminishing the notion of town as community — and thereby diminishing the wholeness of the town, socially, economically, politically.

We have instituted the Australian ballot which allows voting without participation. In some cases, it improves voting *totals*, but it always lowers town meeting attendance over time.

Despite all this, however, I still believe that town meeting can be saved. It will take a self-conscious effort by Vermont as a community to do so, however. Such an attempt must be hard-nosed and rational. But it must be based on faith.

**L**ike it or not, Vermonters have been bequeathed a massive global responsibility. We have been left with town meeting, an institution which is, despite its critics and the cynics, the purest form of democracy on the planet. We may preserve it. Or we may let it go. The responsibility is magnified when we consider this: If we can't govern ourselves on a face-to-face, human level in Vermont, who can?

What to do? First of all we have got to reorder our public services so that community boundaries and political boundaries coincide again. Next, we have to accept the notion that democratic politics can be risky. The people may vote wrong! If we can't accept that *and live with it*, then let's hire ourselves a philosopher king and be done with it.

Then we have to give ourselves more to do at the local level. Voting on advisory items on national and state affairs is okay, if done in moderation. But we must bear in mind one key fact:

the reason people listen to Vermonters as they render their opinions on, say, nuclear disarmament, is because they think we have enough confidence in ourselves to entrust ourselves with the right to govern ourselves. That is the reason why the nation listens when Vermonters speak.

In short, we must resynchronize community and government, accept the concept of political risk, and decentralize power. Most of all, however, we must redefine the principle of progress from bigger, faster, and efficient-at-any-cost to smaller, slower, and human-at-any-cost. Progress must be measured in terms of civic *values*, not civic speed. This is no romantic hankering for yesteryear. For starters, a practical suggestion. Let us establish town meeting day as a state holiday. Combine it with Martin Luther King Day and call it Martin Luther King Democracy Day — a most appropriate act for the first state to outlaw slavery. This would help to eliminate the need for Australian ballots.

**W**hen Charles Kuralt, the media's most famous traveler of "On the Road" fame, was asked recently what his favorite town in all America was, he said he found it in Vermont on Town Meeting Day. Think about that. And think, too, about George Aiken looking out across the valley where the lights of his neighbor's houses "twinkle in friendliness, where freedom of thought and action is logical and inherent." Let us all promise not to give up on his hill farms or his town meetings too easily. And I personally shall promise never to vote "no" again unless I really mean it. ∞

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