



Trouble in the Vermont Hills

MY TURN/FRANK M. BRYAN

What ever happened to the art of letting things be?

For three centuries now, New Englanders have preserved the commandments of democracy by assembling as free citizens in town meetings. In these open gatherings the public good is still fashioned to the tune of unrestricted debate, the air charged with face-to-face political conflict.

Decisions are made on the spot. Kindergartens are created (or denied). Roads are paved (or abandoned). Funds are appropriated to "observe" Memorial Day or fix a town truck. Revenue-sharing funds are distributed. The tax rate is fixed. The people go home. Pure democracy.

Touchstone: Now all that is changing. The town meeting is under attack and we are in danger of snuffing out our only living touchstone to the principles that have maintained the Republic since its birth. The problem is town meetings got noticed.

The hill country of Vermont, with its more than 200 small towns, is the natural habitat of town meeting. "There is no more Yankee than Polynesian in me," said historian Bernard De Voto, "but when I go to Vermont I feel like I'm traveling toward my own place." Roots. Vermont exudes them like sap from a March sugar maple. Part of the sweetness is small-town democracy, "up close and personal." Perhaps that is why town meeting drifted back into the consciousness of a nostalgic nation in the 1970s.

Trouble started when some towns voted to impeach Richard Nixon before anyone else did. Suddenly the glare of network-television lights was fixed on little places like Thetford, with its 1,422 residents and 945 registered voters. Nixon fell. Town meeting started to teeter.

The lesson was clear: "When town meetings talk, people listen." Soon, special-interest groups began to pounce on them like wolves on a downed caribou, feeding their biases on the remains of pure democracy. Ordinances to ban abortions and to stop trucks carrying nuclear waste, proclamations calling for an end to federal budget deficits or aid to El Salvador cropped up on town-meeting agendas (called "warnings"). Stop acid rain. End the nuclear arms race. No matter that when passed none had the force of law. The point was publicity, not policymaking. Slowly, an insidious proposi-

tion began to surface: town meetings are not governments; they are public hearings and public-opinion polls.

The national media led the way, referring to public gatherings anywhere as "town meetings." Steelworkers met to lament the closing of a plant. It was called a town meeting. Farmers came together in the Midwest to protest agriculture policy. It was called a town meeting. The worst offender was Jimmy Carter, who staged "town meetings" all over the world, from Mississippi to Japan.

For Vermonters and their neighbors in Maine and New Hampshire, the attention was more than a little flattering. In 1982 more than 150 towns in Vermont alone

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not to huff and puff about world problems.

passed nuclear-freeze votes and we were showered with praise. Our local institution had been sanctified, our homespun wisdom held high, our good sense exalted.

But there is another feeling afoot, like the one you get watching a small farm being auctioned off for a summer home. It may be only some primeval paranoia caused by the clash of cultures. The uneasiness grows, however, when a leader of the freeze movement says that town meeting is a "tremendous public-relations gimmick" or when a member of the Vermont Public Interest Research Group says they "worked town meeting for all it was worth."

New Englanders do not attend town meetings to huff and puff over the world's great issues. They attend town meetings to get things done. To *close* on issues; to go home with the knowledge that, for better or worse, the town's business was taken care of. And what a special privilege that is—to build law yourself! Local matters are the lifeblood of town meeting. Yet even Vermont's leaders are apt to get it wrong. Commenting on the use of town meetings for the

nuclear debate, some of them said, "That's what town meeting is all about." No, that is not what it is all about. Town meeting is about citizens doing things for themselves. It is about leash laws and lunch programs, a new selectman, raising taxes. Town meeting is a hot meal with neighbors, squeaking chairs, shuffling feet. It is the pulse of political life within a town, for a town, by a town.

Town meetings have dealt with the "big" issues in the past. History shows that actions by the towns in New England forced Jefferson himself to jettison the Embargo Act. Later, several Vermont towns openly defied Congress and refused to obey the Fugitive Slave Act. But it is one thing for a strong and boisterous institution to speak crisply to a national audience. It is another to decry evil from a posture of weakness.

Thus the growing habit of using town meeting to promote national issues catches it at a bad time. In recent decades the towns have been losing power to the state. At this moment, for instance, the Vermont legislature is considering a bill to mandate kindergartens in the towns. If this happens, another issue that has caused lively debate in town meeting will bite the dust—one less item to make real decisions about. One less opportunity to govern oneself. The words of Edmund Burke are instructive: "The true danger is when liberty is nibbled away, for expedients and by parts."

Video Madness: What kind of logic suggests that communities that must be told how to bury their garbage or educate their kids are capable of advising presidents on foreign policy? Some of us hold they can be trusted to do all three. So we distrust those who deny us the liberty to bury our garbage yet egg us on to advise on matters of diplomacy. We would like to govern ourselves locally, privately, away from the video madness of national communications systems and the manipulations of special-interest groups. Town meeting is not a hot commodity. It should not be exploited, but if the present trends continue, town meetings may become nothing more than springtime forums for those who champion whatever causes are current—and a great national treasure will be lost.

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