

Interview Richard Watts & Frank Bryan
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W= Richard Watts
B = Frank Bryan

INTERVIEW

B: I am Frank Bryan I am a former professor of political science at University of Vermont and now emeritus and continuing my work at my own leisure at Starksboro.

W: Frank let's start with talking about Vermont research and why it's important. What is about Vermont that makes it a good laboratory to study democracy?

B: Well it's an outlier. If you're going to study democracy you have to study in my view in small communities. One of the great problems of studying democracy is we call the United States of America a democracy and we call Huntington Vermont a democracy. Well they don't tell you anything about the politics of America or the politics of Huntington to use the word in both venues do they? I mean so democracy, traditional, real democracy as I call it – the extension of what the Greeks were thinking about has to take place in small places and even the Greeks, I mean when we think of a town meeting in Vermont we think about the Greek assembly, but the Greek assembly had up to five thousand people there, it was a huge crowd. The real democracy that would be analogous of Vermont would be in the dems which were the little agricultural communities in Greece – kind of the suburbs of Athens. That's where the democracy took place and then they came together and tried it in that big venue and history of course recorded that so that's what we think about as democracy. But to have that in Vermont you'd have to have a town of thirty thousand people meeting in the football field or something. **Real democracy takes place –even with the Greeks in the beginning– in small places and that's why Vermont is perfect. Think about it 246 cities and towns is just a small slab of real estate forested granite area up there just southeast of Canada. Each one of these towns is historically a coherent unit that did almost everything on their own. They made their decisions face to face. There's no place in the world you could study democracy that would be better,** well historically you could've. Now the Swiss cantons are an example but even there there's very little empirical data. If we could go back historically there would be lots of options.

W: And what is it about town meetings that, you've written that we should think about town meeting process that's for the whole country, what is it about the way we get together in a town meeting that makes it so unique individual and special?

B: Well there's lots of controversy about things but in my view the town meeting is a legislative process whereby you actually fashion public policy face to face in a community and that is hugely different from anything else. The state law now, unfortunately, (I think that it should be changed) says that a select board is the legislative arm of the town. I don't think that's true at all I think that if you go to town meetings you'll find that they are bound by rules of procedure that we stick by and we have to get things done. If you're going to amend an article it takes rigor and precision **so what town meeting says is that we trust ordinary people so much to govern themselves that we'll let them make the laws rather than having them elect somebody to**

make the laws that govern them; Which is astounding when you think about it, and Vermont is a place where you still can do that.

W: There's something you've written about how when you know your neighbors you can't really I don't know, be hostile in the same way you could be if you didn't know them.

B: Yes. That kind of forced intimacy has its upside and downside and I think its upsides is really much more important than its downside. Lots of times we differ, the downside is that we differ too much to the fact that someone is sitting right there and looking at us, that we won't be as tough as we might be in private and that inhibits a certain kind of honesty and reality in making public policy. The upside is though that it creates civility. You learn over the years to disagree with somebody even in public, and be civil about it. **And why do you have to be civil?**

Because you live with them. When you walk out into the parking lot to your car you may bump into the person that you just disagreed with, you see what I mean? "up close and personal" so you're going to be polite with them on the floor of the house in these cases.

You wouldn't get any of this trash that we see on national television now or national radio where people miles apart electronically separated forever that just bad-mouth people consistently. You don't get that and when you do get it its usually over pretty quickly. First of all the moderators don't allow it but **living in a small town community where you may bump into your neighbor on the street creates overtime a civic attitude that's overall key to democracy. Let me give you an example if I'm driving home from work down Big Hollow Road here and I see someone off the road I'm going to stop and help them. Now is that because I'm a better person? Small town people are no better, we're not all going to heaven we're as bad as anybody else but I will stop and I'll stop because they know that's my truck, they know that I know it's them, and so I don't want to meet them on the street or down at the store or wherever and have them say "Why the hell didn't you stop? You went right by me."** So that kind of almost enforced civility creates the habit of civility and forces us to recognize our common humanity in a way that electronic distance never can it never can do that and **I think fundamentally that's the problem with the American republic at the center now is that electronic technology has allowed us to really denigrate each other with immunity, in fact you get paid for it.** If you have a right wing show then the left wing gets a show and at certain levels the one is no better than the other.

W: So Vermonters you've written participate a little more in democracy than in other places, can you talk a little more about that a little bit?

B: Sure! Historically at least and even today, when you look at percentages of people who vote in state and national elections and general indicator of civic behavior Vermont is always very near the top. Robert Putnam's index of civility and tolerance and other indicators of civic participation has got Vermont ranked in the top four or five on most of his indexes. **I have one scatter plot that I love to show to audiences and it shows all the states arranged on civic participation on the top and tolerance on the bottom and the best states are up in the corner and that are high on participation and high on tolerance and there's good old Vermont BAM. I mean, no Vermonter can look at that fifty state display and say not feel DAMN good about it you know? I live in that place. And it's small.** And I'll go ahead and say as Putnam does that it has some historical relationship to ethnicity you know for example the Dakotas often participate a lot more and with a lot more civility and tolerance there's kind of a Scandinavian over-layer across the northern tier of American states that every once and a while

crops up and shows itself with that certain kind of tolerance and civility. But even come on, the Scandinavian places are closer to Vermont because they're cold places miserable to live with a lot of small towns and communities.

W: Now sometimes when you bring people from other places to a Vermont town meeting they say it's long and boring.

B Well yes of course with my reputation in studying town meeting I've had people from now all over the world, I recently had a fellow on a Fulbright at Harvard from China come up and we went to two town meetings. He actually wrote a book about it and sent me a copy but of course I can't even read a word of it, I can't even see if he quoted me for god sakes I have to get someone to help me read that book. But when newcomers come to Vermont even professor Mansbridge at the Kennedy school who did a profoundly important study of town meetings which she saw in the town of Shelburne Vermont (Shelby) was put off a little bit by the rules of procedure for one thing and the fact that it was long and boring. They expected you see, given the national perspective to have fierce debates and Daniel Webster shaking his fists and all that but what it really boils down to is ordinary people going through the often mundane process of dotting the "I's" and crossing the "t's" and talking about things that are local, parochial, trucks and stuff like that. And of course in the last hell, 25, 30 40 years ever since the nuclear freeze movement in the eighties nationally Vermont town meetings are known for their proclamations to the nation about what the nation ought to be doing. And so people outside the town meeting country in northern New England got to think that's what we talk about. That's not what we talk about. And the reason people listen, I mean Jim Leher from National Public Television actually claimed that if it hadn't been for the Vermont town meetings that the whole nuclear freeze movement might not have begun. I mean he credited it all to Vermont. But where does town meeting get that reputation? Why would anybody listen to a Vermont town meeting? And why are town meetings so appreciated? Because people think or did think we solve our local issues locally and face to face. **It's the fact that we can get along enough to govern ourselves that the nation pays attention to us when we give them advice about governing the nation. That's what gave and gives the Vermont town meeting its credibility.** We're no more credible than anyone else in our opinions of national issues. When it comes out of a town meeting its got that wonderful ethic about it that these people took the time away from their local concerns where everyone's equal and everyone has a say to tell us how to govern ourselves and we'd better pay attention to that.

W: I know you've written that the way politicians have adopted town meetings – so we have Obama and George Bush doing town meetings. Do you have any thoughts on that?

B : Well again I think this notion of town meeting as a public forum rather than a legislative decision making body is an unfortunate development that has occurred in the last half century and certainly in the last 20 to 30 years so that – just to pick on Bernie Sanders (I really put off all of my conservative friends when I endorsed him when he first ran for governor I mean I'll never forget that I mean I love Bernie. Why? Because he was mayor of Burlington he was fighting for the rights of Burlingtonians over the state. He was a localist. I still get emails from the Sanders people saying that Bernie is coming from Vermont to hold a town meeting and he can't do that.

W Right, right.

B It's illegal. By the way so many politicians do it I shouldn't pick on Bernie. But I wish he'd change it and I wish the others would too. I think the Leahy office did but I'm not sure. I don't hear from them as much as I do with Bernie but it really wrangles me every time I hear that because it's not a town meeting, it's using town meeting in vein. And it diminishes town meeting and it says indirectly that (and I know Sanders doesn't believe this) o hell I can use this name and it would be like me saying I'm a farmer because I use oxen in the woods sometimes these people say o well I have this farm. No you don't you have a garden. I'm not a farmer. Language is language words mean things and if we can't name things Arthur Bently – a great American philosopher wrote a book called “knowing in the known” and he said that science begins with naming things and if you don't have discrete names what the hell good is it? So that by a public hearing by a senator of Vermont is a town meeting, what are we doing in Starksboro? What are you going to call that? I call it real democracy... but that began when Jimmy Carter held a town meeting in Japan! Well this is just prostitution of the name for political needs it wrangles me.

W: So let's talk about this, you wrote a book with John McClaughry *Recreating Democracy on a Human Scale* and in there you call for a movement. Will you talk about that?

B: Ya that's my favorite book. It isn't my best book but it's my favorite because it made a case and asked people to do something it was a policy book and writing with John McClaughry is a wonderful experience, bright guy. Ya, **we asked for radical decentralization, we still believe in it always have, policy making at the local level in order to support democracy, town meeting, and local decision making.** And by the way the book was positively reviewed by the both *The Nation*, very strong leftist national journal of opinion and *National Review* the quintessential conservative William F. Buckley publication.

So the left and the right both really liked that book. *Los Angeles Times* – great review. The *Boston Globe* very strong review both liberal newspapers and it gave me and I think John too, hope that perhaps the paradigm was shifting. Not because we wrote that book but because we caught on to that particular wave that there's something about that instead of having a long continuum of ideology where you go from left to right that the forces of modern society are bending down the extremes and as they bend down the extremes the extremes come together at the bottom, see what I mean? And what's bending that is the need for democracy and the fear of large organizations being dysfunctional. The left fears big corporations, big business. The right fears big government. What's the commonality? It's a big institution that does things and we know now with crony capitalism how the wallstreet journal is editorializing all the time now about the evils of crony capitalism. What does that mean? It means big government and big business in bed with one another. Happens all the time. And so we wanted to speak to that group of folks. The people that were “small is beautiful” view and that there's not a real difference in terms of democracy between a large corporation and a large government. They're both going to have to hit a mean and the details fall away, democracy disappears, uniformity prevails. It's an old conservative mantra but now the left believes it and that is that one size does not fit all. It just doesn't. And we know that in Vermont. The nation doesn't know that yet, isn't that amazing? I mean you got to have sympathy for president Obama. He puts together a national healthcare system and he can't get it implemented. No discredit to him, who could? This isn't England. We're not a small unitary system here, we're a continental federal republic and you just can't ordain it from the top and expect it to work. Why should the federal

government be telling us in Starksboro what we can feed our kids at hot lunch? Twenty years ago there was a big brew-ha-ha about that, that even the food we serve to our children in school had to be cleared by some federal agency. I'm sounding like a crazy right-winger but I don't think so I think now the left understands that. I mean do we have to have a federal stamp on our maple syrup to serve it at our school down here in Starksboro? Eh we got people here in Starksboro that have maple syrup why can't we just take a can of it and put it on their pancakes but "o no! can't do it" – that's nuts.

W: So do you see these forces of giantism as you call them as overwhelming even Vermont?

B: Ya I think so. Well they haven't overwhelmed us yet but it makes things awfully difficult. And by the way of course there are things that have to be centralized. Let me just give you an example I mean we really have to think creatively, we have to do research creatively now. And John and I did in that book which is more susceptible to the evils of giantism environmental control or education? Well environmental control really has to be controlled from the center doesn't it? I mean the Connecticut river doesn't understand which state it's in and so you have to be smart environmentally from the center but a lot of conservatives have always wanted to protect individuals from environmental rules and regulations.

Well that's really kind of silly when you think about it. Not only can individuals not pollute nor can towns, nor can states so ultimately environmental policy the right ought to begin to realize that its got to be centralized and let's try and do that in the most humane and intelligent way we can. But the left has got to understand that education doesn't have to be centralized. No child left behind coming out of the Bush administration I mean poor George Bush he was trying, he thought the liberals would really like this and they did but it's not going to work, it can't work that just sounds insensitive but if we in Starksboro screw up our education system well we've created a bunch of kids that don't know much. That may have some impact on society, but if Starksboro throws toxins into Lewis Creek for instance and they end up in Lake Champlain think what happens. **So human-scale policy to the localities more heavily instituted in the democratic process. Environmental policies have got to fit environmental systems that don't know political boundaries and therefore cannot be governed by pure real centralist democracy.** You can't let Starksboro have freedom to pollute the waters. You could let Starksboro have freedom in deciding what its kids should know. What pretension is it? I know very few Vermont towns that I wouldn't trust to create a curriculum to educate their own kids. They're smart enough to get experts from maybe the University of Vermont to come in and say what kids ought to know, we're all smart enough to do that and we all care about our kids. I mean why do we have to have a state-wide curriculum?

W: Why does VT research matter?

B: So you're talking about not just the normative thing we can do but the procedural process. **If you ask me the question "Why is Vermont research important. Why is Vermont the perfect place for research?" I think on all fronts it's because fundamentally it's small, its accessible, it's measurable, and its universal enough to provide a laboratory for conclusions that matter for humanity at large. Lets just take my field of social science, in Vermont we have access to data, we have access to leadership, we have access to environments that are clear open and measurable. There are very few things that matter to the world that are not happening in Vermont on a small scale and because it's a small scale it's more accessible to**

us. That's what I base my career on is studying democracy but you can do the same thing in so many venues of scholarship. You don't have to study the nation or some huge conglomerate variables to get at the true scientific variables.

W: Is there anything Frank that you feel is important to say while we're here that you've always been interested in or resonates in people that you talk to?

B: I think Vermont has a special resonance for research of all varieties now because it's become clear that in the last half century electronic technology is a decentralist in character. I like to tell audiences that right now if you have to investigate different types of phenomenon on most levels you can do it just as easily or more easily in Vermont than in many other places because A: it's accessible, but B: living right here in Vermont we have access to any information we need, we don't have to go to some large city with all its amenities. I mean that really used to be the case that if you wanted to do research on a lot of subjects you had to go to the environment that contained most of the people that were studying that. So that you had to go to the Kennedy School or you had to go out to University of Colorado where they have a good program in this or a good program in that. Now you don't have to do that at all you can do that right here in Vermont if you're interested in that comparative stuff.

But the broader point is that the truths of the universe that we all need to know to make the world a better place are operating right here in Vermont and because we're a small human scale open society they're more accesable to everybody. The other thing is that it used to be considered that Vermont was such an outlier, so kind of "backwards", "behind the curve" that goodness, what could come out of there that would be forward looking and on the way but now we know that's precisely been reversed. On most measures people would rather be here in Vermont doing their thing than anywhere else the problem is that they just aren't and they wish they were. To live in a human scale democracy with all the information you need I mean in one sense it may become dysfunctional. Let's just take the library at the University of Vermont which is kind of a centralist thing right? You go to the library to do your research. I have students that go to library less and less and less and less, they just google it. I don't like that some of my most interesting findings have been going to the library to get a particular book out of the stacks and seeing a title next to it and going who the hell wrote that you know? And you grab that and run over to a table you know and read that and pretty soon you're there for three hours with ten books but I'm just using this metaphorically. You can sit right here in Starksboro and be a cutting edge researcher in nuclear physics. So that really makes Vermont a part of what we used to think was a cadray of researchers that were out there and now they're everywhere. Haha they're in the cloud! I hate that term but there it is. **But again in Vermont, take my case: if I really wanted to know what the governor of Vermont thinks about some policy issue I can call him up and ask him.** It isn't because I'm important as Frank Bryan it's because it's a small state. If I'm studying at SUNY- Albany or wherever New York University and I want to know what the governor of New York thinks about a certain policy, what are my chances of getting a half an hour out of him? **You can do that in Vermont. The governor knows that if someone wants a half an hour on a certain policy issue they damn well better give it to em. It's a small state after all.**