

Preserving town meetings

CHICAGO

As Frank Bryan, professor of political science at the University of Vermont has written, real Vermonters don't milk goats.

Nor, I might add, do they pine for the limelight or search out fame and fortune, generally preferring to tend to the homestead and take care of more important things.

But sometimes one of our own unexpectedly ends up being the focus of attention and general acclaim by others. (This is not, to be sure, the case of our congressional delegation to Washington, which more often than not is the reason Vermont is an object of constant derision by almost everyone except progressives in Vermont.)

At this week's 100th annual meeting of the American Political Science Association here, policy-makers and renowned academics from some of the most prestigious institutions of higher learning in the country gathered together at a session on Thursday to talk about none other than our own Frank Bryan and his book, "Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works," published last year.

For a little more than two hours, panelists discussed Bryan, his work and our beloved little state. In fact, it was with great pride that I watched famed academics like Jane Mansbridge and Robert Putnam, both of Harvard University, Joseph Zimmerman of the State University of New York at Albany and others analyze, discuss and talk about Vermont and Bryan's work.

Mansbridge, who in 1983 wrote "Beyond Adversary Democracy," which focuses on a small town in the northeast, praised Bryan, his life-long work and the wealth of data contained in his recent book (in it, Bryan very carefully documented 238,603 "acts of participation" by 63,140 citizens in 210 different towns around Vermont).

The core issue in Bryan's work is whether participation makes better citizens. A preliminary conclusion seems to indicate that it does, she said. Unfortunately, the trend at both state and national levels is towards decreased participation and increasingly marginalized citizens.

Putnam, who is well-known for his 2001 book "Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community," also praised Bryan and said that town meeting is a precious feature of Vermont's participatory democracy that must be preserved.

"What we see in Vermont," Putnam said, "is that government works best when we push decisions down to the lowest possible level."

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(It's what the Europeans call subsidiarity.)

It would be a shame to see it disappear over time, he said, but this is what current data seems to indicate.

The general conclusion among other participants at the roundtable was that Bryan's life-long work indicates that "size does matter."

In other words, small states are able to respond more effectively and more appropriately to the needs and demands of their citizens.

Devolving decision-making power to the local level is preferable to having bureaucrats in Montpelier or Washington (or Brussels, in the case of Europe) make decisions on behalf of citizens. I think very few of us would disagree with this.

In general, there was an overwhelmingly positive reaction to Bryan's work on rural politics and the tradition of town meeting. And when Bryan got up to speak at the end, people in the audience weren't quite sure what to expect. I can attest that Bryan did his state proud.

He spoke gruffly, in a slightly gravelly voice, opening his comments with an off-color joke that embarrassed his wife and surprised the audience of staid academicians. This was classic Bryan.

But the content of his comments was solid, well-reasoned and insightful. And his contributions to the field of politics and to our understanding of town meetings — and democracy in Vermont — simply have no equal.

Bryan is unusual because as he has pointed out before only classicists study direct democracy. He has been toiling away on an area of political science long-neglected by others. For this, Vermonters should feel grateful. He is producing some of the most valuable work in the field on participatory democracy.

But at the same time, as Bryan and several panelists pointed out, we should all be concerned because town meeting is slowly dying. In fact, some have predicted that town meetings in Vermont will completely disappear within the next 50 years.

That would be tragic. Town meeting may not always be the most efficient way to get things done; but perhaps not everything in life should be subject to economic efficiency.

In the meantime, we should feel proud that Bryan and the Vermont town meeting tradition are finally getting the attention and praise they deserve.

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