From tourism to town meeting, this university of Vermont professor has a lot to say about almost everything.

BY DENNIS JENSEN

The man seated behind the wheel of the battered, 1983 Chevette could just as well have been a carpenter or a factory worker. Dressed in work clothes, he fit in so well on the main street of the blue-collar town of Bristol that I looked right at Frank Bryan and didn’t recognize him.

A political science professor at the University of Vermont, the author of Real Vermonters Don’t Milk Goats, persistent critic of big-government and equally the No. 1 authority on Vermont’s great tradition of Town Meeting Day, Bryan is a man who defies expectation.

Brawny and hairy, Bryan is built more like a logger than a college professor. When he speaks, the explosives drip like dead leaves in November, whether the subject be politics or Vermont history or deer hunting, all of which he knows something about.

While he laments for a Vermont of the 1950s, when big government sprawled out of people’s business, Bryan at age 60 is old enough and savvy enough to know that “progress” is here to stay. The trick, he says, is to put some kind of sensible control on urban sprawl, or big government, without infringing on the rights of Vermonters.
The first thing Bryan wanted to know about me was not my credentials as a journalist. "Where did you get those shoulders?" he demanded to know as I introduced myself before a lecture at town meetings at the public library in Pitsford. "You didn't get them sitting behind a computer." That's vintage Fred Bryan: get right to the point, don't mince words and, when possible, do it with humor.

A native Vermonter and former Golden Gloves boxer, Bryan, 60, earned his bachelor's degree at St. Michael's College and a master's degree at UVM. His parents divorced when he was a boy. He and two siblings were raised in Newbury by his mother and Bryan says with a smile, "the tyranny of Christianity." He was raised as a Protestant until the age of nine when his mother converted to Catholicism.

This all took place during the 1950's, a time when the state was economically depressed but, at the same time, isolated and insulated from the woes of the outside world. It was time when a boy with a rifle could hunt where he damn well pleased, when "nobody posted their land." Bryan says. He laments the loss of that time and the encroachment of development. But he's not ready to give up yet: he still believes that the qualities that make Vermont special can be salvaged if the people want it badly enough. His politics, he says, are "communiquant," which he describes as a philosophical position that lies somewhere between liberal and conservative. "I like government the way a liberal likes government," says Bryan by way of explanation. "But when it gets too big, I become a conservative."

BRYAN ALSO TAKES A CONTRARY view of certain political events that have put Vermont in the national spotlight in recent years, in particular the how-bad-are-they high-profile U.S. Senate candidacy of Fred Tuttle. A farmer-turned-movie star, Tuttle captured the national imagination with his, successful native versus non-native campaigns against Republican candidate Jack McMullen, a wealthy businessman recently come to Vermont. In the end, the seat went to Democratic incumbent Patrick Leahy, as everyone knew it would.

While the rise of Vermont smiled at Tuttle's antics, Bryan had a different take on the matter. McMullen "had it coming," he says. "It was a delicious moment. It could only happen in Vermont."

But the political sideshow also troubled him. In Bryan's view, "Vermont is becoming just kind of a theme park of the past, and Fred is becoming a symbol of that and..."
On Sen. James Jeffords: “Jim Jeffords has been whining about Republicans ever since 1972. Jeffords has portrayed himself as the Jimmy Stewart of America, but everything he is in politics he owes to the Republican Party. He has been hostile to Republicans forever. The question to me [on leaving the Republican Party] is, ‘Why now?’ Reagan treated him a lot worse than Bush has treated him. I think, quite frankly, a lot has to do with age and perspective. I think this would be his last term. I understand it. He’s just pissed off. I get that way. I’m too old to make this crap any more. I don’t think it’s an act of courage. This guy is a god in Vermont. He can get 80 percent of the vote.”

The quarter represents a Vermont that is “fine and good, showing the human scale, the small farm,” Bryan says. “Trouble is, 80 percent of Vermont’s maple syrup that’s made ... comes through plastic tubing. We didn’t show the plastic tubing, did we? We showed the buckets. That’s a metaphor for what we’re doing. That’s what I mean by a theme park.”

While the upscale newcomers who have settled here over the past 20 years seem to embrace the theme park concept, he argues that the symbol for “the real Ver-
On Sun, Patrick Leahy:
"A good senator."

On Rep. Bernie Sanders:
"I like Bernie for the reason everybody likes Bernie. He’s never backed down from his positions. He’s the only guy I ever actually did a campaign for. And I still did it because he was running against Peter Smith, another establishment Republican. I thought, like Jim Jeffords, who would take any position he could to stay in the middle. I think America needs Bernie Sanders in Congress. He’s one guy - a working-class, lunch-pail representative - raising hell."

BRYAN DOESN’T JUST TALK about being a Vermonter. He lives like one - with his wife, Melissa, who teaches at Burlington High School, two dogs and one on a 50-acre farm in Stowe. They have seven grown children. He knows about physical labor, having cleared fields for farmers in his youth. He drops, cuts and splits eight cords of firewood throughout the winter. Like the old Vermonters he reveres, he has no backup heating system.

One of his favorite days of the year is the first Tuesday in March - Town Meeting Day. He believes that town meeting is one of the truest things Vermont traditions - imperfect but still an example of local government at its best, just like the state. He travels around the county, lecturing about the significance of Vermont town meetings. "To me, town meeting is glorious because it’s real. It’s real democracy and it exposes airs - and it exposes courage when there’s courage. And it exposes evil when there’s evil," he says. "Alas of people, like reporters or academics or out-of-staters will say, ‘Oh, this isn’t serious as it was supposed to be.’ But this is pure democracy. We didn’t say it was good; we said it was pure. There’s a difference. Soil - but its pure. So - if you’re at town meeting, it’s easy to espouse the jerk." Bryan believes that town meetings can bring out the best, or the worst, in people:

"There is a psychic cost to it. You may have to get up and argue against your neighbor," he says. "Going to town meeting is like going to church. You’re not sure if it did any good, but you feel better." He is elated that his latest book, Real Democracy: What It Looks Like, and How It Works, will be published by the University of Chicago Press. "It’s the first in-depth book on town meeting ever," he says. "It’s a kind of a small, beautiful book."

Smallness is something he believes in, which raises his question in his mind with a small population and a very, very small tax base, will we sell our soul to pay the price of modernism?

State government and industry have a history of going into state to find experts to solve the state’s problems," he says. "I’m in the view, Vermonter are educated and very experienced to devise homegrown solutions to the challenges of restraining sprawl and developing enough clean, small industry to provide good jobs for their children. Citizens, he says, not politicians or bureaucrats, should be the ones to lead the way. "Sureacists like complexity the same way a big buck likes a cedar swamp." Bryan says with a laugh, "They’re both protected.

He believes that Chittenden County, densely populated and jammed with traffic much of the time, should serve as a warning to the rest of the state if we were to do something to face down, the whole state may fall victim to sprawl, hidden in places by theme-park areas dedicated to tourism. "Chittenden County already has its soul... for economic progress, for comfor, for psychological comfort," he cautioned. "And here’s the irony. It sold its soul to the powers."

He also loves about Act 60 and the impact it will have on local schools. "We’re going to love our community schools. I think that’s one of the real big problems facing Vermont today," he says. "You have to keep democracy in the school system. Common people have to govern. The problem with Act 60 is going to make these schools elitist. The upscale families will find a way to get their kids benefits. You and I would too, if we had the resources."

But you’ve got to love... that you can’t have everything. Deal with the dust [in dirt roads]. Deal with the cold. If you come here, it’s going to be tough."

The Vermonter who came here after 1980, who saw the boom years and who cheered the high highways and strip development in Chittenden County, wants the best of all worlds. Bryan says. But development has cost its charm, the greatest of which is being swayed away from Vermont’s farms, its scenery, its open spaces, its independence, its cranky people, and, yes, the rich smell of spread manure drifting down the valley on a hot August afternoon.

If you want to live in Vermont, he says, "You’ve got to put up with different people: hunters, farmers, gun-toters, pro-civil nation people, people who give you the inedible gesture like ‘Jake Back Vermont.’ That’s what Vermont is all about."

"Chittenden County destroyed itself by fixing its highways. You’re going to get to make the hard. There’s no way around it. If you make it too easy, if you build it, they will come."

"Who’s they?" I ask him.

"Damn nearly everybody who isn’t here."

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