

# FROM THE WINDOWSILL

## NOTES ON THE FOUR YEAR TERM

By Frank Bryan



There is a scale to springtime in Vermont — a patience with and understanding of the ties between the planet and the human spirit. Watching green shoots breathing through a wet snow in late April, newcomers are apt to say "the trouble with Vermont is there isn't any spring!" Wrong. By late April spring has been with us for two months!

It begins near the end of February when for the first time a wayward breeze from the south carries an aroma of *fresh* mud. It is signaled by restless crows at dawn, an ever so slight swelling of things, heat on the windshield, sap buckets, a lonely bemitted figure jumping rope by herself in the driveway after school. You can't hurry spring in Vermont. You can only accompany it.

Scale. It marks everything here. Those who live close to the earth know that to violate the natural *pattern* of things (whether that pattern is defined by time or space) is to invite disaster. They know too that this law applies to human events as well as the natural world. It is perhaps Vermont's greatest gift; the day by day reminder of

measure and balance — the lessons of living on a natural scale in relation to the earth and living on a human scale in relation to other people.

The wisdom of human scale appears in our politics too. We see it in the face to face assemblies we call town meeting. We see it in our citizen legislature. We see it in our two-year term for governor. They are all processes of governance appropriate to a tiny rural hill kingdom like ours. Unfortunately some of those who govern Vermont these days seem to be ignoring it. By doing so they threaten our human environment in the same way the massive smokestacks of the Midwest threaten our lakes and mountainsides.

Take for instance the call for a four-year term for governor that we hear once or twice a decade. Almost every other state in the Union elects its governor for a four-year term. So, too, we are told, should Vermont. Those that tell us this claim it would be more "efficient". Elections are time consuming and cost too much. The people grow bored with them. No sooner is the governor elected, they say, than she or he must begin to run for reelection.

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tion again. It is impossible to "put a program in place" in two years they argue. Finding good people to staff the highest positions in state bureaucracy is difficult when there is no "guarantee" of at least a four-year tenure.

These points are not difficult to counter. First of all Vermont in effect does have a four-year term. Vermonters consistently return incumbents that seek reelection. We've failed to do so only once since World War II — and only twice in this entire century! Ray Keyser was defeated in 1962 when Philip Hoff caught the Republicans napping in an off-year election. Mortimer Proctor lost in the Republican primary in 1946. That's been it. Even in 1986 when a weak governor faced two very strong opponents, she finished well ahead of her closest challenger. The governor's race of 1986 can be summed up in three words: Vermont demonstrated patience. Whatever your politics, there is a wisdom in that.

Secondly, sitting governors *ought* to face the voters and thus communicate with them. Reelection after two years actually helps chief executives by reinstating the people's faith in them. After Philip Hoff became the first Democratic governor in a century, he spent most of his first term making plans. When he came up for reelection, he had very little to offer the voters except plans and promises and he faced a strong Republican challenger. Yet Hoff won reelection easily. Armed with a new mandate — one that said in no uncertain terms that this young progressive Democrat was no fluke — Hoff went on to lead a newly energized innovative administration and become the first governor to serve three consecutive terms since the Civil War.

Thirdly, there are no guarantees in politics but any would-be bureaucrats who don't sign on with a new governor for fear of losing the job in two years either knows nothing of Vermont history or lacks any real faith in themselves, their governor and the programs they intend to promote. They probably ought not to serve anyway.

Finally, if elections are too expensive and time consuming, fix them, don't throw them out. Make them right, don't give them up. If the public

gets bored and tired (I certainly do) of the incessant bombardment of campaign ads on TV and elsewhere, the public should elect politicians that won't do that, not throw away the election itself. Talk about babies and bath water! Every Vermonter has heard the expression: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." I don't think the two-year term is broke. But even if it were, should we operate on the principle: "If it's broke, throw it out. Don't try to fix it"? That attitude is as "Vermont" as the Grand Canyon.

The election for governor is the most important election we have. Those that opt for the four-year term are asking us to halve our democracy. They are asking us to jettison our two-year "recall" privilege. They are asking us to further strengthen the executive branch of government at the very time the legislative branch is struggling for survival. They are asking us to profoundly weaken our influence on state

government after a long era of centralization of power in that government. They are in effect advocating a de-democratization of Vermont.

But the chief argument of the four-year termers really is: "all the other states do it." This kind of keeping up with the Joneses mentality lurks behind a great portion of the mischief perpetuated in Vermont. Scale. It all comes back to scale. If the governor of Vermont "needs" a four-year term because of the size and complexity of modern government, does the governor of New York need a 40-year term? While it might be folly to invest too much intellectual capital in this analogy, the point remains: the two-year term is an appropriate socio-political technology for *Vermont*. It "fits" the environment here.

Why do so many of our policy-makers look outward when they plan for Vermont? Why are they so impatient with this land of village and farm-

scape — the most fundamentally democratic place left in America? Why do they insist again and again on sacrificing our lifestyle and our human-scale institutions on the same altar of "bigger," "faster," and "more efficient"? Perhaps they have the same trouble detecting the pulse of Vermont's democracy as they have with seeing spring in the snow banks of March.

When I go to professional meetings of political scientists around America and the two-year term is brought up: I am proud that we stand nearly alone on this and I detect a certain wistfulness in the eyes of my colleagues from away when they say, "Of course, you are *able* to maintain the two-year term up there." Yep. We are. We may not be able to afford all the amenities of modern life, but by damn we can afford our democracy. Let us be patient with it even as we are patient with the seasons. Self government is, after all, only natural. □