

***Vermont Guardian* Vol. 1 Issue 22**

February 18-24, 2005

State of the meeting: All Those in Favor provides tips to preserve and enhance local democracy

By Greg Guma | Vermont Guardian

In most parts of the world, the phrase “town meeting” can mean just about any gathering where local citizens offer their opinions, hear from candidates, or endure the latest government “dog-and-pony show.” As Susan Clark and Frank Bryan readily admit in *All Those in Favor*, their new and timely book on Vermont’s town meetings, references to the term in college textbooks “are as apt to be found in chapters on the media as they are in chapters on democracy and governance.”

Even many Vermonters need to be reminded that this annual event, most often held on the first Tuesday in March, isn’t merely another opportunity for politicians to push pet proposals. Rather, it turns every local resident who chooses to attend into a legislator, free to express their views and empowered to make binding decisions.

For Clark and Bryan, however, town meeting is even more than that. Pointing to a series of social innovations — from challenging slavery and McCarthyism in the past to leading the national debate on environmental protection and civil unions in more recent times — they claim that this tradition is the reason Vermont “consistently places better on indices of achievement in the areas of good government, civil society, social capital, collective generosity, and political tolerance.”

That may be overstating the case a bit. Vermont’s groundbreaking stances have also been the result of courageous individual action, judicial decisions, and grassroots organizing.

The book argues, for example, that the state’s 1982 town meeting votes in favor of a nuclear weapons freeze had a global impact “because the world knows that town meetings are authentic, democratic governments and Vermont has the healthiest system of this kind of government anywhere.” Unfortunately, most of the world didn’t know this at the time — and still doesn’t.

What caught international attention was mainly that people in more than 200 small towns had come to the same conclusion. Town meeting was the vehicle, but much of the credit must go to

determined activists who spent two years educating the public and preparing for that statewide campaign.

Despite such occasional exaggerations, *All Those in Favor* is a highly informative, often inspiring primer that offers a spirited defense of this pure approach to direct democracy, along with some very serious warnings. Bryan, a University of Vermont political science professor, has closely studied town meetings for decades, and brings an authoritative voice to the book. Clark, also an educator, enlivens the text with interviews that inform the book's specific tips.

On the plus side, they note that an average 20 percent of eligible voters attend Vermont town meetings, not a bad figure when you consider the comparatively large amount of time involved and the fact that, across the United States, voter turnout for local votes is only 25 percent. In addition, 44 percent of those who attend town meetings actually speak, a very high number for any legislative process.

Women fare better in this local legislature than in any other part of the U.S. political system. Only 14 percent of the Congress is female; in the Vermont state Legislature it is 30 percent. But according to a study of 44 town meetings conducted in 2003, 48 percent of those involved in passing local budgets and setting the tax rate were women.

The level of participation varies widely, however. Small towns average more than 30 percent attendance, while only about 5 percent show up in larger communities. Admitting that town meetings aren't that effective in participatory terms when communities grow beyond 5,000 people, Clark and Bryan recommend that cities and larger towns consider either a representative town meeting or division into "neighborhood meetings."

The representative approach, used in Brattleboro and parts of Massachusetts, involves electing "members" to represent the citizens of various neighborhoods. This preserves the face-to-face aspect, and allows almost anyone to become a local legislator for a day. The authors recommend that larger towns like Bennington, Colchester, and Hartford, as well as cities such as Barre, Newport, St. Albans, Montpelier, Winooski, Rutland, and South Burlington consider moving in this direction.

"Neighborhood meetings" involve the empowerment of smaller divisions in larger communities like Burlington, and turning over some services — for example, early child and elder care, neighborhood schools and youth centers — to such mini-legislatures. At the moment, though, the trend is toward streamlining rather than enhancing participation with initiatives such as instant runoff voting.

For Clark and Bryan, one of the great threats to town meetings is the trend toward Australian ballots, which allows voters to avoid discussion and instead use pre-printed forms to vote. It is much simpler — as well as less time consuming and, for some, less threatening— but it removes the "right to legislate" and eliminates flexibility. For example, "school boards watch entire budgets go down because a simple compromise on one issue is impossible," they explain.

Another problem, only briefly acknowledged in the book, is the long-term loss of decision-making power to other levels of government. Until 1947, Vermont towns conducted their own business on Town Meeting Day without state interference. Since then, however, the state Legislature has been tinkering with the process, while gradually usurping local power in more and more areas.

In response to town meeting initiatives like the nuclear freeze votes, there was an attempt in 1983 to raise the petition requirement for placing items on local ballots. That didn't happen, but the intention was clear: to make it more difficult for people to raise issues not in favor with elected leaders.

Despite the trend toward centralized decision-making, Clark and Bryan see some promising signs.

First, Vermont still has a highly accessible citizen legislature. More crucial, they believe that "a new truth is emerging" around the world: "big is being replaced by small. We stand just past the summit of the age of giantism," they write.

To aid this process, they suggest a series of practical short- and long-term steps. One of the most dramatic, yet completely reasonable suggestions, is to institutionalize the ability to participate locally by making what they call "Democracy Day" a paid holiday "when offices, banks and businesses would close in a grand celebration of community life."

At the moment, although town meeting is a state holiday, only state employees and businesses that choose to follow the state calendar get time off. To gradually change that, one of the suggestions is that businesses encouraging worker participation in local democracy be publicly acknowledged.

The book also recommends that communities consider how various policies and proposals affect political health by developing a "democratic impact statement." The basic idea is to ask questions.

For instance, does the proposal improve local decision-making power? Does it enhance communication, allowing more voices to be heard? Or perhaps emphasize local history or identity? And since every 10 minutes added to a person's drive time reduces involvement in community affairs by 10 percent, will the project reduce traffic or the daily commute?

All Those in Favor is full of such facts and suggestions. Although partly a celebration of town meeting's many virtues, it mainly functions as a detailed call to action. Noting that town meetings are in decline in Vermont, Clark and Bryan warn that without such democratic governance, "all hope for an economically sound, socially just and environmentally safe commonwealth will wither and die."

That may be why they have subtitled the book *Rediscovering the secrets of town meeting and community*. As they note, not even enough Vermonters fully appreciate what they have.

However, as long as people can gather in local schools and meeting halls, debate issues that matter, and make meaningful choices, there is hope. “Town meeting is democracy — arguably the world’s most perfect working example,” this slim but potent volume argues.

Will that tradition be passed on to the next generation, or better still, become a model for other places hoping to reinvigorate local politics? If enough recommendations are followed, the “new truth” the authors mention may yet bring us “into the green valleys of home and the humanity of localism, diversity and democracy that awaits us there.”

Remarkably enough, after reading the book, it’s a bit easier to believe.

Posted February 18, 2005