

Town Meetings — A Relic

By Frank M. Bryan

BURLINGTON, Vt. — The town meeting is teetering on the brink of extinction. Here in Vermont, evidence of its jeopardy is everywhere as special interests make ready to pounce on the one power that the meetings have left — the power to coat issues with democratic respectability.

While Vermont still romanticizes town meetings, while national figures stroke local egos by using town meetings' name in vain (Jimmy Carter held "town meetings" in Mississippi and Japan), and while the towns themselves are only too willing to splash about in a pool of "great" issues injected too often by outside interests, the state has made off with the towns' political clothes.

The problem is that the state government has gutted the towns' political power. Towns don't decide things anymore. During the 1960's, Vermont snatched power away from its local

ities so rapidly that it led 48 other states in centralization. By 1968, local units had less power than in any other state except Alaska. A major blow came at the hands of the United States Supreme Court when Baker v. Carr (1962) and Reynolds v. Sims (1964) wiped out the "one-town, one-vote" basis of Vermont's lower house. Towns were divided, split up, grouped, and clustered in a manner that struck at the integrity of the town as a political unit. The consolidation of school districts and the separation of school meetings from town meetings stripped many town meetings of their greatest local concern, education. Welfare became purely a state matter. In highways and taxation, the towns are los-

ing authority. The fact is that towns have precious little policymaking clout left.

Town meetings began to be used to promote special interests. Anti-Nixon groups placed impeachment items on agendas in several towns. Then the Vermont Public Interest Research Group "worked town meetings for all they were worth," as one insider told me, hoping to get a number of towns to deny various privileges to nuclear-power companies — action that the towns had no legal power to take. No matter. To Research Group operatives moving in on the towns, the point was to publicize the issue even if policymaking was impossible. In the late 1970's, Right-to-Lifers placed anti-abortion ordinances

before the people. If passed, of course, they would have lacked the force of law. But the point was to use the meetings for symbolism.

This year, Norman Rockwell fashion, the pure light of democracy streamed through the windows of town halls all over Vermont and fell squarely on the nuclear-arms race. The result: benignly worded resolutions proposing a nuclear-arms moratorium were overwhelmingly passed in most of the 160 towns where they were brought up.

While one might agree that taking any step to reduce the threat of nuclear war is worth it, the campaign to bring the moratorium before the town meetings left an uneasiness — the kind of feeling one gets while enjoying a court-

try auction where, huddled at the graveside of a dead hill farm, one hopes to buy a milk can to use as an umbrella holder or an ox yoke to string with potato plants. This is because, I believe, there is a deeper question of governance involved here.

Are localities capable of authentic self-government? Vermont seems to be saying no. The glory and eloquence of local democracy — the very ingredients special interests are feeding on — has become tarnished. If Vermonters cannot govern themselves locally, who can? In plain fact, town meetings are being prostituted for selfish political gain, even though — in the case of the nuclear-moratorium campaign — many of us would heartily endorse the



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sources of the "selfishness."

If New England is to remain the only region in the United States with institutionalized direct democracy, I would suggest this prescription:

1. Let Vermont and other New England states begin to return real decision-making power to localities. Let these powers be there for today and tomorrow. If they be minimal (and perhaps they must be), let them at least be totally local.

2. Let the elites leave town meetings alone — in short, people like Jimmy Carter should keep "hands off." You have your county courthouse. We have our town meetings. Do not covet thy neighbor's political institutions.

3. Let the towns refuse to cater to the whims of special interests. Let them seek to expand their powers in areas of natural concern, laying aside the temptation to huff and puff over the great issues unless and until they have recaptured a legitimate power base of their own. Perhaps then, when towns speak, people will listen. Otherwise, if local, direct democracy is indeed impossible in the postmodern world, then let it die alone and in peace in the hills of northern New England. Spare us the indignity of being touted around the nation as glorified public-opinion polls. Those who understand Vermont and Vermonters will understand.

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