

# Democracy in Vermont

Small is beautiful in the Green Mountain state.

By Bill Kauffman

"While many seek the truth by scanning galaxies through powerful telescopes, my eyes have been glued to a microscope—looking down, not up, inward, not outward. America has often seemed transfixed by big. I am captivated by small."

— Frank Bryan

FRANK BRYAN IS THAT RARE political scientist who can begin one statistics-dappled tome by describing his wife as "the sexiest wench in the galaxy" and enliven another with footnotes recounting his first gun, cows he has milked, getting beat up in a dance hall over a girl, and the abandoned farms of his Vermont boyhood: "the only trace of the old McEachern place is in a faraway corner of my heart."

He once ran afoul of the town ordinances of Starksboro, where he lives in a converted deer camp on Big Hollow Road, by having 20 junker Chevettes in his yard. (As a communitarian, not a libertarian, he disposed of these parts-cars with only moderate grumbling.) Bryan is a legendary character at the University of Vermont, where he teaches political science: he is the horny-handed son of toil who does regression analysis, the regular-guy intellectual who prefers the company of "working-class people ... the old Vermonters." And now the irrepressible Bryan has made a major contribution to his field (and his country, which is Vermont) with *Real Democracy* (University of Chicago Press), his magnum opus, the most searching and sympa-

thetic book ever written about the town-meeting democracy of New England. The book is a veritable four-leaf clover of academia: a witty work of political science written from a defiantly rural populist point of view.

I met Frank Bryan for breakfast at the Oasis Diner on Bank Street, the working-class Democratic eatery in downtown Burlington that for 50 years has been owned and operated by the Lines family, making it an oasis of family ownership in the desert of Applebees and Olive Gardens.

Howard Dean may be the best-known living Vermonter, but Dean, Bryan notes, is a cosmopolitan flatlander who was "raised in an environment as completely estranged from town meetings as one can imagine." Though Dean displayed spasmodic heterodoxy in his presidential campaign, he embodies little of the "curious mixture of radicalism, populism, and conservatism" that Bryan says has defined Vermont politics since the days when Anti-Masonry and abolition were in vogue.

If the Green Mountains had a face, it would be Frank Bryan. He is the real Vermont, the enduring Vermont, not the picture postcard, not the *New York Times* reader in her air-conditioned summer home, but the Vermont of Robert Frost (a Grover Cleveland Democrat who placed his faith in "insubordinate Americans") and craggily iconic Sen. George Aiken, who once explained that "some folks just naturally love the mountains, and like to live up

among them where freedom of thought and action is logical and inherent."

"My mother raised me a Democrat. Vermont raised me a democrat. This book springs from a life of fighting the dissonance between the two," writes Bryan in *Real Democracy*. Son of a single mom, who worked in the mills, Bryan has that "redneck's chip on my shoulder" essential to a healthy, authentic populism. His Class of '59 at Newbury High totaled seven, which led to his politics: "Keep it small. The basketball isn't good, but everybody gets to play," as he told the *Vermont Quarterly*.

After graduation, "I went off to school and heard about how poor and destitute and dumb people like me were because of the size of my community." One summer he hiked Mount Moosilauke with his brother, who was studying for the priesthood. "I went up that mountain a Kennedy Democrat and came down a Goldwater conservative because my brother convinced me that the Democrats were going to destroy the small towns; they didn't care about small farms or town meeting."

Bryan has since shed his illusions about the commitment of Republicans to any small-town value not reducible to the bottom line on an annual corporate report. The modern GOP is the party of war and Wal-Mart (four of which deface Vermont, the last state to have been infected by the Arkansas Plague). Bryan now calls himself a "decentralist communitarian" whose heart "is with the small is beautiful crowd."

Yet he is no dewy-eyed idealizer of The People: "Jefferson said rural people are the chosen people of God—that's a bunch of crap. But forced intimacy is good for society; it makes us tolerant. The reason I'll stop and help you out of a snow bank on Big Hollow Road isn't because I particularly like you. But I might see you tomorrow at the store and have to explain why I didn't. And I expect reciprocity."

Washington-New York conservatives despise Vermont for its "liberalism," though I cannot see how Bernie Sanders is any more destructive of American liberties than, say, Dick Cheney. Or perhaps they hate Frank Bryan's state because, lacking any sense of place or local loyalties themselves, they fear communities organized on a human scale. Burlington, Vermont's largest city, has fewer than 40,000 residents, and the state leads the nation in the percentage of its population living in towns of under 2,500.

Frank Bryan calls himself a "Vermont patriot," and one is reminded of Chesterton's dictum that a patriot never boasts of the largeness of his country but rather of its littleness. As he and John McClaughry wrote in *The Vermont Papers* (1989), their refreshingly radical proposal for devolution of state government: "Vermont matters most because it is small, not in spite of it."

\*\*\*

"The proposals that Vermont secede from the United States and Kingdom County secede from Vermont were moved and passed, as they had been annually since 1791, when the Green Mountain State first joined the Union. These were the only two measures the people of Lost Nation ever agreed upon unanimously."

— Howard Frank Mosher  
*Northern Borders*

Mosher, Bryan's favorite Vermont novelist, depicts town meeting as a blend of cussedness and community, radicalism and renewal. Elsewhere Mosher has written of Northern Vermont as being "full of fiercely antiauthoritarian, independent-minded individualists" for whom "independence, rooted in local land ownership and local government, seems to have remained the chief objective." Ecce Frank Bryan.

Bryan views town meeting as the palladium of this independence. His research into its workings and meaning has been his "life's work," as Harvard's Jane Mansbridge has said. *Real Democracy* is the result.

Every March since 1969, Professor Bryan has sent his students at St. Michael's College and later the University of Vermont to the school gyms, auditoriums, church cellars, and fire stations of the 236 Vermont towns holding annual meetings at which the citizens present—about 20 percent of a town's population, on average—vote on budgets, elect officials, levy taxes, and otherwise decide whatever governmental business has not been usurped by the central authorities in Montpelier and Washington, D.C.

Bryan's sample is enormous: almost 1,500 town meetings "encompassing 238,603 acts of participation by 63,140 citizens in 210 towns." This mountain of data is vast and unique, for as Bryan notes incredulously, "No article on town meeting has ever been published in a major political science journal. Never. ... [W]e know much more about the Greek democracy of 2500 years ago than we do about real democracy in America today."

Why the neglect and nescience among political scientists? "They don't trust common people," he says of his confreres. "They were trained by professors who were trained by people who were terrified by fascism and the 'tyranny of the majority.'"

Transient suburbanites and hypermobile city dwellers, they fear nothing so much as the unlettered rural man with a voice and a meaningful vote. They cannot see that the diffusion of power inherent in town meeting is the best defense against tyranny. Bryan quotes Goldwater speechwriter turned Wobbly Karl Hess, who "once said that Adolf Hitler as chancellor of Germany is a horror; Adolf Hitler at a town meeting would be an a -- hole."

Yes, localized direct democracy is majoritarian, but the citizen unhappy with a law may appeal to her neighbors, who are often kin or lifelong friends. At the national level, however, she is just a single vote in a mass of anonymous millions—not even a brick in the wall. A Vermonter who dislikes his town's junk-

## MOVING?

### Changing your address?

Simply go to **The American Conservative** website, [www.amconmag.com](http://www.amconmag.com). Click "subscribe" and then click "address change."

To access your account make sure you have your TAC mailing label. You may also subscribe or renew online.

If you prefer to mail your address change send your TAC label with your new address to:

**The American Conservative**  
Subscription Department  
P.O. Box 9030  
Maple Shade, NJ 08052-9030

car ordinance can remonstrate with his landsmen; a Vermonter who dislikes "No Child Left Behind" or the Iraq War can shut up or get drunk, but he can't get within a Free Speech Zone of George W. Bush.

Bryan's central finding is that "Real democracy works better in small places—dramatically better." The smaller the town, the higher the percentage of citizens who participate in town meeting. The only other variable with any potency is the presence of controversial items on the agenda. If town meeting is waning, as pulseless technocrats often charge, it is because "Vermont towns have steadily been losing the authority to deal with controversial issues." Voting up or down on the purchase of a snowplow is fine, but for grassroots democracy to thrive, we must restore to small places control over education, welfare, and economic regulation.

"Issues are absolutely essential," Bryan stresses. "Liberals think you go to town meeting because you have a civic duty. There's some of that, but no one is damn fool enough to give up a spring day [for that]. But if their kids' education is up for grabs, they'll damn well be there."

Bryan sums up the key to successful direct democracy: "Keep jurisdictions small and give them real things to do."

\*\*\*

"And where do I live by preference, when I am not teaching? Vermont. Why? Because it is, in most of the ways of freedom and space, more like the West I grew up in than most of the Contemporary West is."

—Wallace Stegner, 1971

Since the 1930s, Vermont has attracted rustivating intellectuals who "bought abandoned farms and stayed from last frost to first," as Bryan jokes.

Vermont doughtily gave Alf Landon three of his eight electoral votes in the presidential campaign of 1936, and on Town Meeting Day of that same year her gallant citizens rejected by a vote of 42,318 to 30,987 the Green Mountain Parkway, a federal proposal to build a freeway through the Green Mountains, despoiling them in the service of faster travel and car-window tourism.

Frank Bryan calls the defeat of the Green Mountain Parkway "the most democratic expression of environmental consciousness in American history." I suppose that today's Beltway conservatives would revile Vermont for spurning national greatness, progress, and the

pany has planned. The result would be the Vermont desired by many of the newest immigrants: no old Vermonters, but plenty of nature parks.

Frank Bryan describes the two waves of post-World War II immigration to his state: the first salutary, the second malignant. "The first were hippies who came for ideological reasons: they wanted to live small, get a horse or cow. They bought chainsaws and wounded themselves. But they've done a lot to preserve town meeting and local government because they were real lefties."

The "post-1980s influx," by contrast, "is much more upscale: let's go to the cleanest, safest state in America and get

## BRYAN SUMS UP THE KEY TO SUCCESSFUL DIRECT DEMOCRACY:

**"KEEP JURISDICTIONS SMALL AND GIVE THEM REAL THINGS TO DO."**

gracious gift of asphalt proffered by that modern conservative hero, FDR. (Bryan later opposed, unsuccessfully, the infliction of the Interstate Highway System upon northern Vermont.)

The rejection of the Green Mountain Parkway, which Bryan sees as mythic in its defiance and radical in its implications, reveals an old Vermont that is green and truculent, little and rebellious. I am reminded of "Where the Rivers Flow North" (1993), Vermont filmmaker Jay Craven's fine adaptation of Howard Frank Mosher's story of a hook-handed Northern Vermont logger and his Indian common-law wife, played *con brio* by Rip Torn and Tantoo Cardinal. The leased land on which the logger's family has lived and died for generations is bought by the Northern Power Co., which intends to flood it for a dam. The logger, declaring that he will not be "bribed off my land," tries instead to cut down the trees and, not incidentally, ruin the "nature park" the power com-

a trophy house with a nice view. They want to preserve the ambience of small—no old Chevettes in the yard; cows are okay as long as they don't s---t too much—but they want to use the politics of centralized authority. They don't care who's living here or how we make decisions as long as Vermont looks like a theme park. They want to be in Vermont but they don't want to live in Vermont. We spend tons of money to preserve old farm buildings, but there's nothing like that to preserve town meeting or the citizen legislature or the two-year term for governor [which is under bipartisan assault] or the democratic values that created [Vermont] in the first place."

Bryan notes the social gulf between the old Vermont and the new. "The people that had the [anti-civil unions] 'Take Back Vermont' signs were the people that created the image that these new guys want: they extol them. When a farmer stands up at a town meeting, the flatlanders all go, 'It's a farmer!'—like

God is here. But do they invite them over for tea? No. They don't socialize with them."

(Civil unions between same-sex couples, Vermont's latest claim to political particularity, "didn't have much impact," says Bryan. "The Right thought everything's going to hell, we'll be the haven, but nothing like that happened." The way the unions were achieved, however—by a "court-directed legislative cave-in"—affronted Bryan's democratic sensibilities. "We overturned 2500 years of Judeo-Christian tradition in three months without an election. The people who backed civil unions were so intolerant of those who didn't; the professional people couldn't understand why the red-necks were all bent out of shape.")

The Take Back Vermonters were acting in a long Vermont tradition of resistance to centralized tyranny. The state's political genius was a kind of stony Jeffersonianism—without the stain of slavery. Vermont learned early the virtues of states rights when it defied the Fugitive Slave Act. Vermont would not return a slave without a "Bill of Sale from the Almighty," declared state Supreme Court Justice Theophilus Harrington.

Vermont remained an independent republic, outside the nascent union, from 1777 to 1791, and imaginative Vermonters are asking, why not again? In 1990, Bryan traveled Vermont with State Chief Justice John Dooley debating the state's secession from the union. (Bryan argued the affirmative.) He is "very sympathetic" to the green economist Thomas Naylor's campaign for a "Second Vermont Republic"—that is, an independent Vermont, detached from the United States, as Naylor proposes in *The Vermont Manifesto* (2003).

"When I put the secession argument to the test intellectually, I can't think of a reason not to, even economically," says Bryan, who nevertheless opposes secession for perhaps the only legitimate

reason: sentiment. "I couldn't sit around and let a bunch of crazy Vermonters like me tear down the American flag. My heart would break."

The regionalist who actually lives in the place he loves is often given to alternating fits of lachrymose romanticism and utter despair. Bryan sounds the occasional plangent note, but in the main he radiates optimism: a quondam technophobe, he credits computer technology with making possible "a dramatic decentralization of lifestyle and culture."

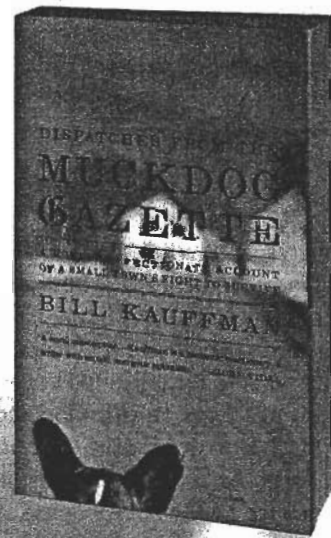
"People are living and working in the same place," he says. "They don't have to drive to a centralized workplace, which was the great dislocation of the 20th century." The divorce of work and home visited upon us horrors ranging from daycare to the Interstate Highway System; its reunion may bear fruit delicious, including the revitalization of local democracy.

In any event, Frank Bryan is in Vermont, for better or worse. As a patriot, he stands on what he stands for. With *Real Democracy*, he has given his state, and us outlanders as well, the most detailed and affectionate portrait ever painted of town meeting, which is, as Bryan says, "where you learn to be a good citizen." His book is also an act of love. It shows Vermont how to stay Vermont. For as Bryan avers, "The only way to save Vermont is to preserve our democratic institutions."

Bryan likes to quote Jack London: "I would rather my spark should burn out in a brilliant blaze than it should be stifled in dry rot." Those fires you see lighting the Green Mountain sky are Frank Bryan's bonfire, which burns so brilliantly because its kindling is so dear to him, so dear and so wonderfully, life-givingly small. ■

*Bill Kauffman's most recent book, Dispatches from the Muckdog Gazette, is now out in paperback from Picador.*

## A HILARIOUSLY ACERBIC ACCOUNT OF ONE SMALL TOWN'S ATTEMPT AT URBAN RENEWAL



"There is myth and poetry in this refreshing look at a town...Kauffman is one of the most original journalistic voices in America today."

—*Richmond Times-Dispatch*

"A small masterpiece... Kauffman is a romantic reactionary, a writer with an odd, energetic optimism."

—Gore Vidal

"Those born in a small town will know what [Kauffman] means and probably envy him for having had the gumption to go back home."

—*The Wall Street Journal*

Available wherever paperbacks are sold

**PICADOR**

What to Read Next  
www.picadorusa.com