Town meetings

(A blizzard hit us tomorrow. Town Meeting Day, all sorts of complici-
ations will arise. Attendance will be very small, comparatively, and
important issues will be decided only by groups that feel some interest
is so important that they must vote regardless
of the weather. Also, in many places the polls of off
the older side, and driving through heavy snowfall is
often disastrous to such people.

Towns such as Pittsfield held their
open meetings on the weekend, but
town officers and some major issues
like bonding have been warned for
March 1 and the vote must take place
on that day.

School districts can shudder for days of
heaviness when the issues would have
be difficult to getting around. It's too bad
the governor doesn't have authority to
declare a statewide emergency on a bliz
zardly Town Meeting Day and postpone
the opening of the polls until later date.
Perhaps he should have responsibility for
making permits, but postponement depend-
ing on whether a blizzard covers the state
at any part of it.

The statutes would have to be
changed considerably to allow for that
kind of flexibility and the rules gov-
erning the warnings of election for ve
rious officers and issues would need a
lot of adjustment to allow for post
ponement legislatively.

As a matter of fact, it might be a good
idea to change the date of Town Meeting Day from
being always on the first
Saturday in March to a date on
a specified weekend such as the last
Saturday in February or the first
Saturday in March. More people
would be able to come to the open meetings
and polling places on a weekend with
out having to miss most of a day at work.

The Vermont Sunday Magazine of
the Herold and Times Argus carried
excerpts from a book on this state's
town meetings, written by Samuel Clark, a Vermont
educator, and Frank Bryan, a
VMD political science professor. They
offer many insights as to the advantages
and disadvantages of the Vermont sys-
tem, and find that the advantages far
outweigh the drawbacks.

You often hear the expression that
the Australian ballot method of voting is
more democratic because it gives more people a chance to participate.
Clark and Bryan have some of that.
This is what they say:

"Use the Australian ballot as little as
possible. In a well-intentioned effort to
include more people in decision-making,
an increasing number of Vermont
towns are destroying their town meet-
ing in the process. The Australian bal-
ket allows citizens to avoid going meet-
ing altogether... We are told it will save
town meeting while the reality is that it poisons it and lets it die slowly..."

The poll of the Australian ballot
was never more clearly demonstrated
than for the Mill River Union High
School district. When the district was
formed, informal meetings took place
when people gathered at the school and voted by voice. District budgets
usually passed. With the excuse that
Australian ballot would increase par-
ticipation that system was installed —
and almost immediately, the budgets
began to be defeated. At least once the
districts had to go to the voters six times
in one year. The "no" voters didn't have
to stand up and argue their position in
front of their neighbors. Clark and
Bryan make that point clearly.)