

Frank Bryan: Real Vermonters and Real Democracy.

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Dr. Frank Bryan, an associate professor of political science at the University of Vermont, has written two books about rural politics: *Yankee Politics in Rural Vermont* (University Press of New England, 1974) and *Politics in the Rural States* (Westview Press, 1981). Vermont readers, however, know him best for *Real Vermonters Don't Milk Goats* (New England Press), a humorous book which he wrote with fellow Vermonter Bill Mares in 1983. Vermonters and Vermont politicians also know Dr. Bryan for his outspoken views on Vermont town meeting, the bastion of participatory democracy in New England.

Window of Vermont associate editor Don Tinney, a native Vermonter who

doesn't know how to milk a goat or a cow, recently interviewed Professor Bryan at the UVM campus in Burlington, where Dr. Bryan directs the Master's in Public Administration program. He has also taught political science at Middlebury College, Johnson State College, Montana State University and St. Michael's College.

Dr. Bryan lives with his family in Starksboro, Vermont, where he keeps oxen, steer and a few small animals, including a goat, which he claims never to have milked. While he did grow up in Newbury, Vermont, the professor's real Vermonter friends force him to admit to being born on the wrong side of the Connecticut River. "I was conceived here, but born in New Hampshire."

WOV: What has been the reaction to *Real Vermonters Don't Milk Goats*?

Bryan: It's been awfully good, better than either Bill or I imagined. They printed 10,000 copies in the first round and within a week they ordered another 20. It must be up to 46-47,000 sales now, in a year. We may end up selling to ten percent of the state's population.

I think we managed—we got really lucky or something—to strike a balance. I think the real Vermonters get a kick out of it because they like to chuckle at themselves and their situation; and I think the flatlanders aren't put off too much because

they're also good authentic people. They understand the nuances and the struggle of life up here in Vermont. The theme really is that Vermont is a tough place to live; and to compensate and rationalize for that we do some pretty funny things. I think people who are very sure of their status in anything can laugh at it.

WOV: Are Vermonters really different from flatlanders?

Bryan: I think yes. The person who has lived most of his conscious life here and lived in a situation of close interface with the land, which you have to do, develops a set of attitudes and values that really are different from those of people who are raised in a more urbanized context, which doesn't have this continual linkage and hinge point with the forces of nature. That's a lot of what being a Vermonter is about. It's learning to cope with the most efficient of all phenomena, which is nature.

WOV: Has the goat book raised any serious issues?

Bryan: There's a serious issue underlying it. I don't think it's raised any, but I do think it speaks to the serious issue of the socialization of the newcomer, the interface between real Vermonters, the real Vermont culture and the new culture.

"I think the newcomer, the so-called flatlander, has paid Vermont and Vermonters a real compliment."

The conflict we've heard about for the last 20 years—between the newcomers and the old Yankees—is pretty much overdone. I've heard a lot of people say, "Well, you go to town meeting and the newcomers fight with the oldtimers. . . ." I don't see that as much. I think that's partly a fabrication of sociologists who think that it ought to be the case.

I think the newcomer, the so-called flatlander, has paid Vermont and Vermonters a real compliment. This is the first generation that's moved into Vermont in over a century, a conscious migration into a rural state like Vermont. What seems to be happening is that the newcomer is saying, "I want to live like you do. I want a slow, up close and personal, small

town, healthy, environmentally clean, no-more-fast-lane-for-me existence. For a century people have been deriding that, so we have to view it as a compliment. But, there's a hidden problem involved. It's awfully hard to shuck your old values. I think the tragedy may be that the newcomers, not understanding the pathos and toughness of Vermont, change it, or want it changed, toward their own ideals without even knowing it.

I think there's a certain cosmetics

about the new rural migration. Living in rural Vermont in a cosmetic lifestyle, rather than a real one. That's what we say in that book in a sense. The newcomers are trying to fabricate a Currier and Ives existence without really living it. The Currier and Ives prints show a real culture. People used the oxen yoke, now we take the oxen yoke and put it over the garage door, or we put the old sleigh in front of the house and put some flowers in it, or we take an old milk can and put our umbrellas in it.



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It looks like we're living in the nineteenth century, but, in fact, we have a consulting firm in Darien, Connecticut and travel back and forth. You can't run a culture and society on those cosmetic grounds, so what we have to do is make that interfacing of old and new more authentic, more indigenous to the culture. We've got to live with Vermont, not just in it or on it. If we're going to maintain any cultural legitimacy and honesty, we have to do something that works in Vermont.

WOV: Do you see that happening?

"I think we've got to turn around this insatiable urge to make everything equal . . ."

Bryan: A little bit. We do see some people now moving back into the larger towns. I think that's a natural readjustment. There was an overextended ruralism in the 70's and 80's when a lot of people moved into the countryside for the wrong reasons. They moved into the countryside to fabricate a rural life, but they really didn't want to live a rural life.

WOV: What's unique about rural life?

Bryan: Rural life is a human scale life that demands complicated and interpersonal relationships, dutiful relationships. Some people want the complex life, full of social options that urbanism offers; and that's a darn good way to live—I don't knock it at all. In fact, I like urban life in a certain sense, but urban life is not and can not be rural life. Rural life is slow, simple. The rural person says, "I consciously choose to not have as many options. My kid may not be able to choose between violin, ballet and harp lessons. In fact, there may be no musical lessons at all. He'll just have to go out in the pasture and throw stones at beetles, or build a tree house or do whatever rural kids do, kind of alone, by himself on dusty country roads." That's what rural life's about. It's that slowness, simplicity, lack of options. You can't have both! I think the readjustment of going back to the city by people who didn't fully understand the implications of rural life is a good healthy thing.

WOV: Along with their misconceptions about rural life, do you think people have any misconceptions about Vermonters?

Bryan: Yes, I think there's a couple of them. First of all, there's an idea that Vermonters are romantics, that they like the romantic idea of country living and that they're kind of impractical. I think that is absolutely untrue. Vermonters accept progress immediately. You show me someone who milks cows by hand and I'll show you a flatlander. Anyone who milks cows wants a milking machine. If you've got to milk cows everyday, you'd be crazy to do it by hand. Vermonters are very practical, progressive people who have always had to adopt new ways to do things to make life easier, because life is so tough. I think around the country they think of Vermonters in terms of the noble savage; and we're not that at all.

Another misconception is that we're conservative. We're not conservative, never have been. We have a certain Yankee frugality about us, but that really comes from necessity.

in an overt way. I was watching a television show the other night, a sitcom, and the situation called for a couple of simplistic, very stupid people. There they were. They had a backwoods, rural accent. When I read the literature in political science, I still see people with that urban sophistication putting down rural people for being slow and simplistic and not quite as bright as everyone else. I think that's one of the stereotypes we've got to get rid of.

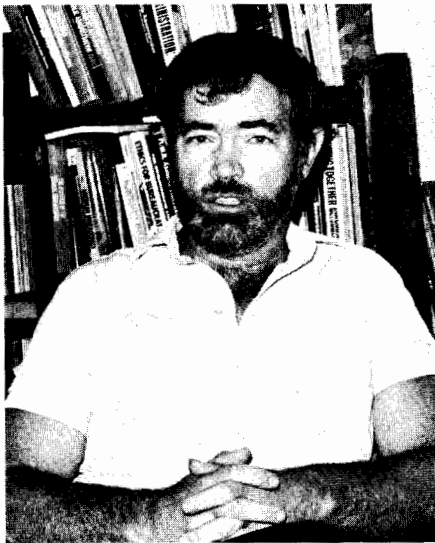
Vermont is much more technologically advanced than many other states. Our percentage of folks in high tech industries is very high. There's nothing more sophisticated than a modern Vermont dairy farm. I'm always amazed at the extent to

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which flatlanders are awestruck by the technology which surrounds a common Vermont dairy farm. They just can't believe that these farmers really play around with embryo transplants and computers, milk testing, soil tests and all of this other stuff. Why should they be so surprised?

WOV: Speaking of being surprised, quite a few Vermonters were surprised by the findings and conclusions of your ongoing study of town meeting. How has that institution changed?

Bryan: In a couple of ways. One of the ways it has changed is that we've tried to make some structural changes to increase participation and it hasn't worked. For instance, we've instituted the Australian ballot, which allows you to come in and vote and then go home. In some cases, that increases total voting, but it decreases the attendance at town meeting. We've tried to go to holding town meetings at night, so that the person who doesn't get the day off from work can go; but night meet-



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You just can't play with Mother Nature. You can't be inefficient when you're living on the margin. In terms of our politics, we've always been quite liberal.

There still is this general stereotype of ruralness; it's very negative. Rural people may be one of the last cohorts of folks that are discriminated against

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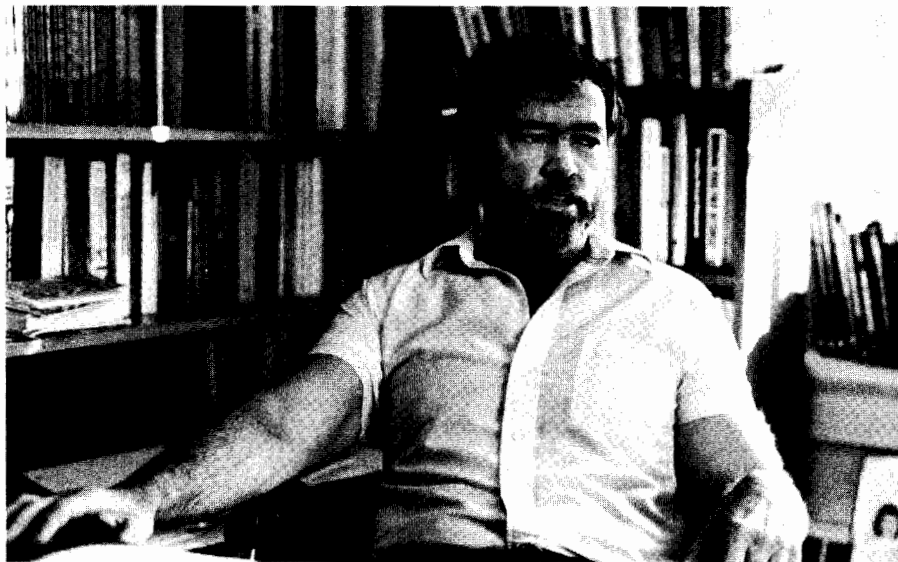
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ings have no higher attendance, and sometimes lower attendance, than the traditional day meeting. Trying to apply rational techniques—and they seem rational—to improve attendance really hasn't done it.

"Town meeting is for going and making a decision . . ."

The other thing I see changing is the kind of issues being discussed. There are two things there. One is the more macro-societal, wider issues, the big issues (national and international). The other kind of issues involve not town matters, but regional matters. If you go to a typical small town meeting this March, you'll find that a great number of votes on the warning will be whether or not to give town funds to regional agencies providing regional services. The town is deciding whether to join these regional things; they're not providing these services themselves.

If you extract the revenue sharing discussion, the funding of regional organizations, and the big issues, and



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look at just the things the town does as a political unit, for and by itself, it's pretty small. If you take away the time spent on revenue sharing, the total time spent in town meeting has declined sharply since 1970.

My general conclusion about town

meeting is that the attendance and participation is holding up remarkably well, given these constraints. I'm a fan of town meeting. I'd like to see if we couldn't somehow maintain it as an operative form of direct

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democracy, but I get awfully pessimistic sometimes.

WOV: Does that pessimism stem from the fact that we've given our power to the state and national government?

Bryan: In a sense, the Federal government has given us something to argue about by giving us these revenue sharing funds. They've actually helped the participatory process. I think the problem with town meeting democracy is a simple one. Citizens, no matter where they are, like to make decisions. They're not interested particularly in just continually giving advice about things. They want to see something happen.

Under the traditional town meeting that we had just 15 to 20 years ago, you made a decision and you saw it happen right there. What is happening in national elections is that we've lost the linkage between input and output. We go and vote, but we don't see anything happen. We really don't see any results. We give advice and it doesn't seem as if anyone listens. In town meeting, you're not giving advice. If you vote down the kindergarten, it isn't a vote of advice; your kid's not going to have a kindergarten. The linkage between input and output is personal and human. That's what the soul of de Tocqueville and Jefferson and the great lights of American democracy and politics have always been about. People participate when something is at stake.

WOV: Is that why you are opposed to the fairly recent resolutions which simply send a message from the townspeople to the lawmakers in Montpelier or Washington?

Bryan: Exactly. As soon as Vermonters understand that all they're going to do at town meeting is to give advice to somebody, they're not going to bother to go anymore. I am a supporter of votes for the nuclear arms freeze, because I think that's an exception. I think that anyone who is confident about himself can make exceptions.

Here I think we can get back to our original point: the in-state, out-of-state conflict and changing Vermont over in the image of something else,

even though you don't intend to. The person who comes into Vermont from out of state thinks that political participation is nothing more than giving advice, because that's their experience. They're not experienced with the notion of having to come up front and voting against Mrs. Brown for moderator and then seeing the tear in her eye if she loses. They think that, "If I go to town meeting and say something and give advice and vote, that's it." That's not it. Townmeeting is for going and making a decision and coming home and having something changed. I think that's what is at the soul of town meeting; and that's what we're taking away. The towns are losing power. We don't trust ourselves anymore.

Anyone who has watched town meetings carefully knows that a good amount of the time, when the people leave that hall, there are people griping and moaning and saying: "Damnit, I'm never coming again. Those stupid idiots voted this in. How could we be so dumb to do that?" That's part of it. That's all part of it. That's humanness. That's the glory of it. There are passionate moments, as there ought to be. There's conflict, division, and all the good things that come in human relationships. That's what it's all about.

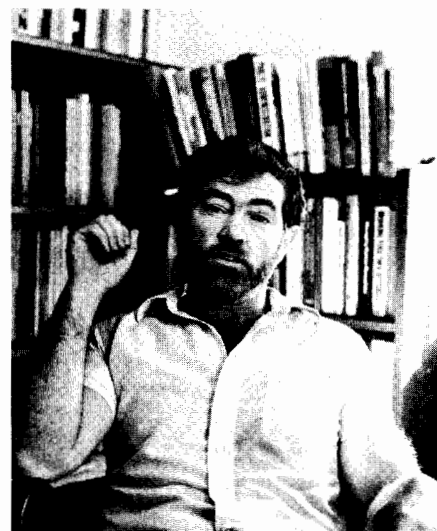
WOV: How can we save that democracy of town meeting?

Bryan: I think we've got to turn around this insatiable urge to make everything equal, symmetrical, the same and predictable. For example, we're saying, "If we have a statewide system of appraisal, then we could have a fairer, more egalitarian, more equal system of state aid to education." If you do that, then you're not going to be able to vote on these items at town meeting. So, we say, "O.K., we'll give up voting on them at town meeting because we want this symmetrical, egalitarian statewide distribution system." To make things symmetrical and perfect, we're giving up our right to be different.

Look, I think that someone who honestly supports town meeting has to be willing to say, "If the town of Barnard (I'm just pulling names out

of the air) votes for good roads at the expense of good education, while the town of Bethel votes for good education at the expense of good roads, I'll accept that divergence and let them do it. Even though I might be a.) for good roads or b.) for good education, I am more for the right of people to make those choices themselves."

I think if we could just get back to that kind of thinking, we could save town meeting. That's what needs to be done.



"I'm a decentralist humanist. Now, I know that may sound jargonistic, but what am I going to tell you?"

WOV: Do you see decentralization as an answer to some of these problems?

Bryan: I'm a decentralist, as you can tell, yet on issues of environmental control I really think we need national law. That's one of the areas in which we should centralize control. If you can't stop acid rain in Vermont that's generated in Ohio, you can't declare a war on Ohio and send troops out there. You've got to have a national approach. On social issues like education and welfare, I think local priorities, needs and concerns and administrative apparati are what are needed. It seems to be just the opposite. We're creating national welfare safety nets; I'd rather have local community involvement in those kinds of things.

The problem with the safety net concept is that no one is responsible. When the safety net goes, why do we

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have street people? There isn't any community infrastructure to have people say, "Oh, we know him. We can't let him sit there in the cold; we've got to take him in." Robert Frost said, in "The Death of the Hired Man"; "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in." In a lot of Vermont communities, despite the horror stories about the overseers of the poor—and there are a lot of horror stories—I think the poor folks in those towns felt a community homeness. We had to take them in, now we don't.

WOV: Do you think we will ever progress far enough to get back to that sense of community responsibility?

Bryan: There certainly is a decentralist movement in America and a decentralist movement in Vermont. I'm a little bit encouraged because I see a melding of the left and right, a meshing of the old idealogues from both sides. Look at it this way: the old conservative really opposed big government and the old liberal opposed big business. Now, there are members of both groups that oppose bigness. They view the large bureaucratic structure, whether it be General Motors or the Department of Education, as authoritarian and basically inhuman. They don't allow us to have human scale relationships. We're coming together in a coalition that says, "Let's bring politics and social life back to a human scale, a community and neighborhood context, and work from that."

People in the press have called me a conservative; and when you do that you say more that's untrue about me than you do that's true. The concept just doesn't work. If you called me a liberal, it would be the same thing. You'd be imparting notions in people's minds that don't have any reality.

WOV: What do you call yourself?

Bryan: I'm a decentralist humanist. Now, I know that may sound jargonistic, but what am I going to tell you? I'm not a conservative in the classic sense because I want governments to do an awful lot of things.

But I'm not a liberal in the classic sense because I don't want the Federal government to do an awful lot of things.

WOV: In general, are you optimistic about Vermont?

Bryan: I guess so. I'm generally optimistic anyways. Yea, we'll probably muddle through. I am really worried about the problem of governance. I'd hate to see us give that up.

WOV: Well, what are we doing right in Vermont?

Bryan: I think basically that Vermont is liberal in the good sense of the word. We care about people. I'd wish we'd do more at the local level. We have a very healthy environmental consciousness. We certainly see the linkages between what we do economically and what we do culturally and what we do environmentally. We've always had much higher spending levels for welfare and education than other states in America. When we say our teachers are some of the lowest paid in America, what isn't said is that nearly everyone in Vermont, on relative salary scales, is very poorly paid. It's just a low-income state. We have a great sense of history here. I think societies and cultures have to have that. Vermont is more than just a geographical distribution of towns and cities. It's a living, organic entity. It has a history and a future.

WOV: That sounds fairly optimistic.

Bryan: Look, I think one of the things that fascinates me the most is the challenge of Vermont. We really do have an opportunity to govern ourselves here. We're one of the last states in the Union that is small enough and human scale enough to somehow hold on to maintain what we've got. I'm really saying that we're way ahead of other people in terms of our potential to maintain a human scale lifestyle. While that's optimistic, it's also very challenging. It would be too bad to blow it. ■

Photos by D.L. Tinney