Trouble in the Vermont Hills

What ever happened to the art of letting things be?

For three centuries now, New Eng- landers have preserved the commandments of democracy by assembling as free citizens in town meetings. In these open gatherings the public good is still fashioned to the tune of unrestricted debate, the air charged with face-to-face political conflict.

Decisions are made on the spot. Kinder- gardeners are created (or denied). Roads are paved (or abandoned). Funds are appro- priated to "observe" Memorial Day or fix a town truck. Revenue-sharing funds are dis- tributed. The tax rate is fixed. The people go home. Pure democracy.

Touchstone: Now all that is changing. The town meeting is under attack and we are in danger of snuffing out our only living touch- stone to the principles that have maintained the Republic since its birth. The problem is town meetings got noticed.

The hill country of Vermont, with its more than 200 small towns, is the natural habitat of town meeting. "There is no more Yankee than Polonius in me," said histo- rian Bernard De Voto, "but when I go to Vermont I feel like I’m traveling toward my own place." Roots Vermont exudes them like sap from a March sugar maple. Part of the sweetness is small-town democracy, "up close and personal." Perhaps that is why town meeting drifted back into the con- sciousness of a nostalgic nation in the 1970s.

Trouble started when some towns voted to impeach Richard Nixon before anyone else did. Suddenly the glare of network- television flashed on what were little places like Teshford, with its 1,422 residents and 945 registered voters. Nixon fell. Town meeting started to titter.

The lesson was clear: "When town meet- ings talk, people listen." Soon, special-inter- est groups began to pounce on them like wolves on a drowned caribou, feeding their banquets on the remains of popu- larism. Ordinances to ban abortions and to stop trucks carrying nuclear waste, proclama- tions calling for an end to federal budget deficits or aid to El Salvador cropped up on town-meeting agendas (called "warnings"). Stop acid rain. End the nuclear arms race. No more taxes that passed none had the force of law. The point was publicity, not policymaking. Slowly, an insidious proposi-

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passed nuclear-freeze votes and we were showered with praise. Our local instution had been sanctified, our homespun wisdom held high, our good sense exalted. But there is another feeling afoot, like the one you get watching a small farm being auctioned off for a summer home. It may be only some primieval paranoia caused by the clash of cultures. The uneasiness grows, however, when a leader of the freeze move- ment says that town meeting is a "transmit- tive public-relations gimmick" or when a member of the Vermont Public Interest Re- search Group says they "worked town meet- ing for all it was worth."

New Englanders do not attend town meetings to huff and puff over the world’s great issues. They attend town meetings to get things done. To close on issues, to go home with the knowledge that, for better or worse, the town’s business was taken care of. And what a special privilege that is—to build law yourself? Local matters are the lifeblood of town meeting. Yet even Ver- mont’s leaders are apt to get it wrong. Com- ments on the use of town meetings for the nuclear debate, some of them said, “That’s what town meeting is all about.” No, that is not what it is all about. Town meeting is about citizens doing things for themselves. It is about lawn laws and lunch programs, a new selectman, raising taxes. Town meeting is a hot meal with neighbors, squawking chairs, shuffle feet. It is the pulse of politi- cal life within a town, for a town, by a town.

Town meetings have dealt with the “big” issues in the past. History shows that ac- tions by the towns in New England forced Jefferson himself to jettison the Embargo Act. Later, several Vermont towns openly defied Congress and refused to obey the Fugitive Slave Act. But it is one thing for a strong and boisterous institution to speak cringingly to a national audience. It is another to be driven by evile from a posture of weakness.

Thus the growing habit of using town meeting to promote national issues catches at it a bad time. In recent decades the towns have been losing power to the state. At this moment, for instance, the Vermont legisla- ture is considering a bill to mandate kinder- gardeners in the towns. If this happens, an- other issue that has caused lively debate in town meeting will bite the dust—one less item to make real decisions about. One less opportunity to govern oneself. The words of Edmund Burke are instructive: “The true danger is when liberty is nibbled away, for expediency and by parts.”

Video Madness? What kind of logic sug- gests that communities that must be told how to bury their garbage or educate their kids are capable of advising presidents on foreign policy and legislating what they can be sub- stanced to do all three. So we distrust those who deny us the liberty to bury our garbage yet egg us on to advise on matters of diplo- macy. We would like to govern ourselves morally, privately, away from the video mad- ness of national communications systems and the manipulations of special-interest groups. Town meeting is a hot commodi- ty. It should not be exploited, but if the perceptible trends continue, town meetings may become nothing more than springtime fo- rum for those who champion whatever causes are current—and a great national treasure will be lost.

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