

Frank Bryan Leans To Conservative Values, Liberal Vision

By HAMILTON E. DAVIS

BURLINGTON — One afternoon in 1963, Frank Bryan, a 22-year-old St. Michael's College student from Newbury, went for a climb on Mt. Moosilauke in New Hampshire with his older brother, David.

Frank, a Catholic from a small Vermont town, admired underdogs and Democrats, and was a committed partisan of President John Kennedy. That was when he went up the mountain.

When he came down, he was a conservative Republican. David had

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convinced him that Democrats like Kennedy and newly elected Vermont Gov. Phillip Hoff were going to destroy the Vermont towns.

Through the 1960s, as the Kennedy liberals turned the administration of the American dream over to Washington bureaucracies, Bryan pursued his own vision of a small town renaissance, earning a master's degree at the University of Vermont and a doctorate at the University of Connecticut.

Now a professor of political science at the University of Vermont, Bryan spends his time studying rural politics, particularly in New England, amassing data that incidentally may undergird the decentralization of American political life, returning such issues as education and welfare to local control, and leaving for the federal govern-

ment only clearly national matters — defense, trade, major environmental controls and the like.

Holding these views make him unusual in his field: A young (41), conservative, Republican political scientist. They also place him on the cutting edge of a trend in American politics, a trend manifested nationally in the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, and in Vermont, by the unexpectedly strong showing of one of Bryan's heroes, John McClaughry.

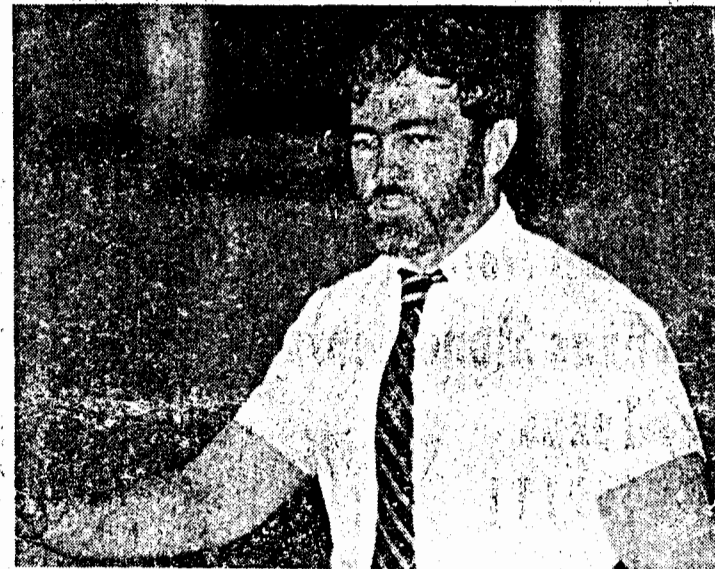
At the same time, he is intrigued by the "vision" of the left, in the emphasis by young radicals on the values of community and local participation. "We need to combine the hard-mindedness of the right, with the vision of the left," he says.

Thus his pantheon of heroes includes not only the populist Republican George Aiken, and the tough, managerial Republicans like Gov. Richard Snelling and Luther F. Hackett, the decentralist Republican McClaughry, but also Bernard Sanders, the socialist mayor of Burlington.

"If you talk about his state socialism, then I want no part of it," Bryan says of Sanders. But he likes Sanders' efforts to revitalize neighborhoods, and as for Sanders' attempts to devise special tax programs for Burlington, he says: "I like that."

Bryan burns particularly about the extent to which education and

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Frank Bryan holds forth.

Frank Bryan

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welfare have become nationalized concerns, more and more removed from their local roots.

Education belongs in the town, Bryan contends, recalling his days at Newbury High School: A graduating class of seven, the town hall packed for the Newbury-Wells River basketball game, the court so small that the center court circle intersects the key, the cheerleaders who, it must be admitted, are not necessarily all beautiful.

Virtually every decision about this school system was made by local people; and the system worked, he says.

If every community finds its own way in education, then innovation and experimentation will flourish and across the country there will be general progress. If education is forced lockstep to national or state standards, then innovation dies, and if a mistake is made, the results are catastrophic.

"If the Soviet Union decides it wants to teach the new math in a certain way, and they do it badly, then every kid in the Soviet Union would go down the tubes," he says.

"For progress to take place, you have got to risk mistakes," he continues. "If you really believe in power to the people, you have to let them make mistakes. Yes, they may vote down the hot lunch program and the kindergarten..."

Taking welfare away from the local communities is equally detrimental. Bryan contends. There is nothing more human than charity, he says, yet this most human of impulses has now been extruded from the federal and state administered welfare system.

"We have dehumanized welfare in the name of protecting the psyche of those who get it..."

Bryan acknowledges there are two arguments against relocating welfare in communities: that poor people might gravitate to towns with generous welfare benefits, and conversely, that local officials might discriminate against individuals or ethnic groups they do not like.

These fears might have been valid once, Bryan says, but they are valid no longer. There has been a "massification" of values, he asserts — people are not so parochial any more. "There aren't as many racists in the country as there used to be. We're better people than we were."

While Bryan's views on education and welfare are in the mainstream of libertarian thinking, his views on economics are not. The federal government, he says, ought to act as a sort of "fiscal clearinghouse," ensuring that great wealth cannot be inherited and that huge personal incomes are not be permitted.

"You don't need more than a couple of million," he says. "Once you've got that much, the government ought to tax, say, 95 percent."

Moreover, he believes the federal government ought to redistribute money on a regional basis, sending to Vermont, for example, more than it gets from the state, while doing the opposite for wealthier states.

If the federal government wants people to live in a relatively poor state like Vermont, they ought to be willing to pay something for it, he says.

Bryan began his teaching career at St. Michael's College in 1968, went to Montana State University for two years, then moved back to the University of Vermont. He is the author of two books — "Yankee Politics in Rural Vermont," and "Politics in Rural States."

Wherever he has been, Bryan has lived according to his views. With his wife and two children, he now lives in a converted deer camp in Starksboro, without a telephone, skidding his firewood in with a team of oxen.

He goes out of his way, however, to say that this is not "artsy-craftsy," that most people who live in the country need some kind of outside income. Still, getting close to the land is crucial.

In an article called "The Lonely Villagers," published in a UVM quarterly, Bryan notes that too much of Vermont is now a facade: It looks rural, but it's really suburban.

"We are making life in the country palatable in spite of the land, in spite of the seasons, in spite of the temperature, in spite of the heavens and sighs of the working out of ecological dynamics," he wrote.

Despite his strong feelings about these issues, and his support for the decentralized Republicanism of politicians like McClaughry, Bryan does not believe he has designed a new political system that can be adopted whole.

"It is not a rigorous paradigm I'd be presumptuous enough to lay on people."

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