

# A Habit of the Heart

“Town Meeting is like sex. When it is good, it is very, very good and when it is bad — it’s still better’n anything else.”

**S**everal springs ago, about the time the ice on the Connecticut began to heave and warp ever so slightly and the sun was warm on the sugar maples, Charles Kuralt came to the Upper Valley. This man, who Andy Rooney says “does more things well than anyone on television,” has logged over a million miles *On The Road* for CBS Television, and visited hundreds of communities all over America.

Kuralt stopped at one of the little mountain towns that flank the valley, Strafford, Vermont, and there he found something that would cause him to say later that of all the places he had visited

in America this was his favorite.

What he found was town meeting. There was a vote that day in Strafford on whether or not to turn off the streetlights to save money. Listen to the words of Kuralt: “If any citizen demands a secret ballot, a secret ballot it must be. Every body who votes in Vermont has taken an oath — to always vote his conscience, without fear or favor of any person. This is something old, essential. You tear off a little piece of paper and on it you write ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ Strafford votes to keep the streetlights shining. . . .

“Then a little more wood is added to the stove and a dozen more questions are

debated and voted on in the long afternoon. What is really on the menu today is government of the people. . . .

“When finally they did adjourn and walk out into the snow, it was with the feeling of having preserved something important, something more important than streetlights — their liberty.”

There are many ways to defend town meeting. One can call up the wisdom of some of the great leaders of our past. Jefferson, de Tocqueville, Emerson, Bryce are all lavish in their praise. This century’s leading scholar of the city said about town meeting in 1961, “the failure to grasp the town meeting and continue it

by  
**Frank Bryan**

— indeed incorporate it in both federal and state constitutions — was one of the tragic oversights of post-revolutionary developments. . . .”

The late E. B. White, one of America's greatest essayists and men of letters, said of democracy, “It is the recurrent suspicion that more than half the people are right more than half the time.” And in the long run it is a further truth that the “efficiency” of a decision is directly proportionate to the support it has among the people. No institution fashions the people's will with the dexterity of town meeting.

## **T**own meeting is more than a government. It is, as Jefferson said, a schoolhouse for citizenship.

But quoting the great thinkers is too easy. The real challenge is to be convincing about one simple point. Town meeting is democracy and democracy is worth it. “Democracy is the worst form of government,” said Winston Churchill ironically, in true Yankee fashion, “except for all the other forms.” The best defense of town meeting is a challenge: show me a better democratic way. There are better methods of making decisions quickly and with apparent efficiency, but there is no better way to govern democratically.

Would anyone seriously contend, for instance, that the decisions made by Congress for America, or Concord for New Hampshire, or Montpelier for Vermont reflect the will of their citizens better than the decisions made by the citizens themselves at town meetings in Lyme or Strafford?

Town meeting is for those who believe in democracy.

Democracy is for those who trust in humanity. For those who do not, the option is to get yourself a philosopher king. How one selects a philosopher king is, of course, a bit of a problem. Until we solve that problem we seem to be stuck with ourselves. We in our little towns and communities. We with the warts and prej-

udices and misconceptions. We of the callused palms and fat bellies, of straight ties and cardigan sweaters. We the young and we the old, flatlanders and woodchucks, in the black and in the red, farmer, lawyer, mechanic. We the people.

Not a bad bunch.

Often we are drawn to the horrendous mistakes made by the people in their town meetings assembled. But mistakes are only a glorious affirmation of democracy's value. For real people, practicing real democracy, are bound to make mistakes — real ones. If town meetings made no mistakes, they would be reflective of the City of God, not Enfield or Hartland or Hanover or Norwich. Until the people become gods, there can be no democracy without error.

Another strength of town meeting relates to its scale.

Little governments make fewer errors and they have more successes. The extremes of both — error and success — are also apt to be greater. All this comes from the law of size and mediocrity. The more interest groups that have to be satisfied before a decision can be made, the more that decision is likely to be a “lowest common denominator” decision. That is why congressmen never say “This new law is just what the country needs.” They always say, “It isn't what we needed, but it's the best compromise we could reach.” Thus in its trials and errors, its successes and failures, its variety, innovation, liberalism and just plain stubbornness, small governments and especially town meeting governments have the capacity by and large and over time to trend upward in the quality of their decisions.

Small governments are different from big ones, too, in that their failures are more visible. The larger the government, the easier it is to hide behind size and complexity and distance and detail. Let a town clerk run off with a few thousand bucks in the Upper Valley and all hell breaks loose. Yet millions are lost through dishonesty and incompetence every day at the national level and it doesn't even warrant a line in the *Washington Post*.

In short, the town meeting is central to the aspirations of any democrat. It asserts the fundamental wisdom of the common person. By its very nature it sanctifies openness and abhors secrecy. It holds the human spirit in the highest esteem. It is grounded in a fundamental truth that the truth will out in any free debate of citizens. Every citizen a legislator, the

town meeting is based on principles which for 2500 years have been in the dreams of those who have sought to build democratic governments. Trust in assemblies of neighbors is the ultimate compliment to the human race. It is fair to say, in the parlance of later 20th century prime-time television, “It doesn't get any better than this.”

But just how good is “better”? The debate over the merits of town meeting is like the story of Rumpelstiltskin. Remember the peasant girl whose father told the king she could spin straw into gold and what happened when it became apparent she could not? Defenders of town meeting have been far too long boasting that it can spin the straw of politics into the gold of democracy — writ perfect. This strategy is disastrous because it is so obvious that it can't. Town meeting assailants simply hone in on the gross exaggerations and pick them off like sitting ducks.

What is the truth? What happens when town meeting defenders put their statistics where their mouths are? My study of nearly 1,000 different town meetings in Vermont shows the following:

| <b>Town Pop.</b> | <b>% of Registered Voters<br/>in Attendance</b> |
|------------------|---|
| 100-1000         | 22%   |
| 1000-2000        | 12%   |
| 2000-3000        | 9%  |
| 3000-5000        | 4%  |

In a typical sample of 122 meetings studied between 1983 and 1985, most in towns of under 2,000 population, attendance ranged from 40 percent of the registered voters to three percent, averaging 17 percent. Fifty-three percent of the attenders were men, 47 percent were women. Forty-one percent of those in attendance participated verbally. The average meeting lasted three hours and 24 minutes, not including lunch or other adjournments. In that time an average of 163 individual acts of participation (excluding seconding a motion) took place. There was, on the average, one empty seat for every two people in attendance.

The most participant town meeting of the sample was the little town of Belvidere, Vermont, with a total town population of 218. The average attendance during the meeting was 44, exactly one-third of the registered voters. Thirty-nine of the 44 participated verbally at least once dur-

ing the meeting. In Williamstown, Vermont, 320 people attended town meeting, 24 percent of the registered voters. But only 47 participated. In Williamstown, the ten percent of the attenders that participated had 90 percent of the participations. In Belvidere, the ten percent that participated the most had only 33 percent of the participations.

What about it? Is 17 percent of the registered voters enough to substantiate our claim? Not if we play the Rumpelstiltskin game. Let's play another game, let's play "Show Me Where It's Better." The Churchill game.

Once every four years in America we elect a person who, on a bad day, could make an error of judgment and destroy the planet. We have the opportunity to vote for the most powerful person on earth, the President of the United States. That election is preceded by two full years of hype. Millions and millions of dollars are spent urging us to vote for one candidate or another. On the same day we elect 435 congressmen, 33 senators, numerous governors, thousands of state legislators and thousands and thousands of other state officials. For months organized political parties engage in "get out the vote" campaigns. On average it takes about 30 minutes to vote in this election.

Less than 55 percent of us do. About one out of two do not.

Burlington, Vermont, has a socialist mayor, the most controversial politician in the state. When Bernard Sanders was re-elected for his third term, there was substantial opposition. The race was red hot. In the weeks preceding the election, the fervor grew until it seemed that it was all anyone talked about in Burlington. Would Bernie Sanders be re-elected or not? On election day, turnout was "tremendous" — the highest in modern history.

Forty-four percent. Almost two out of three of those who could vote in Burlington, didn't.

Typically, when items are put up for popular vote in America on community referenda, less than five percent vote. Cities are consolidated, schools closed, taxing power increased or decreased with seldom more than ten percent turnout.

In this context, Vermont's 17 percent begins to look better. Consider these points:

- The state government in Vermont has been busily snatching power away from the towns — shutting off the oxygen of

recognize peace, not war, is the desire of all of us. Then we have to use pressure to stand up to the more offending politicians who seem to feel that a little nuclear blowout wouldn't do us much harm."

When Helen North's mother-in-law first suggested five years ago that the two travel together to the Soviet Union, North was not enthusiastic. But as time went on she became more and more intrigued by the idea — to the point that even when it turned out that her mother-in-law could not join her, she decided to take the trip.

"There was this terrible friction between the two countries," says North, a petite woman with sparkling, serious eyes, "and we had little unbiased information about them. It seemed necessary to me, if we were to be in a position to trust each other, that we know more about each other."

By way of preparation, North, who works at the Montshire Museum, spent several years taking courses on the USSR at Lebanon College, as well as reading on her own. Her guesses as to the lack of accurate information available to the American public were confirmed by this preparatory experience.

"While I was studying, there was so much taking place at the same time," she explains. "A Robert Kaiser 1973 book on the Soviet Union was good, but the things he had observed were changing so much under Gorbachev. Our Russian teacher would translate Gorbachev's speeches, then we'd read accounts in our own papers and find very contradictory things. In 1984 there was a time when a group of six nations volunteered to be a verification committee if arms reductions could be worked out. It was welcomed by Gorbachev, but meanwhile, over here, we were still in the 'evil empire' phase."

The coming of a group of Soviet citizens to the Upper Valley under Bridges for Peace Auspices two years ago cemented the desires of Smith and North to go take a look for themselves. While North's trip took her to Moscow, Riga (Latvia), and Leningrad, Smith spent his time in Moscow and Baku (Azerbaijan). North met with writers, students, religious leaders and peace activists. Smith concentrated on factory visits, although he also managed to meet with religious leaders and other Soviet citizens.

While some of their time was spent in such formal meetings, both Smith and North made sure to get a ground-level view of things, unsupervised by guides and translators.

"I'd go out at 6:30 every morning, unes-

democracy, the capacity to make real decisions that count. There is increasingly less *reason* to attend town meeting.

- Citizens spend over three hours at town meeting. When you include an hour for lunch, this pretty much uses up a whole day. How many would give up a whole day to participate in a national election?

- Town meeting day in Vermont is *not* a legal holiday. For many Vermonters, attendance would cost them a day's pay. One wonders how many Americans would vote in presidential elections if it cost them a day's pay!

- Town meeting takes place every year, year in and year out. And every year these figures hold up. We only ask Americans to vote once every four years. How many would bother if they had to do it once a year?

These have all been quantitative arguments. When one considers the *quality* of the participation, the case for town meeting becomes overwhelming. What town meeting goer has not returned home livid with anger at what occurred there? But that is the point. Town meeting is more than a government. It is, as Jefferson said, a schoolhouse for citizenship. We learn to politic — rules of order, give and take, winning and losing, jackasses and statesmen. It's all there. We learn a certain patience and humility, too. Town meeting is truly a *humanizing* experience.

Consider the case of Pauline Bennett, who attended town meeting in Charleston, Vermont, last year. She was chairperson of the school board. In the town report was a request to increase the school budget by 23 percent. This, while school enrollment had dropped 14 percent. And you think you got troubles!

At 10:30 the voting began on town officers. No contests occurred — until Bennett's seat came up. Two others wanted the job and a secret ballot began. The townspeople wrote the name of their favorite candidate on a piece of paper, socialized their way to the ballot box, voted, and returned to their seats. The result: Bennett, 52; Frezell, 41; Colburn, 27.

But it takes a majority to win. Town meetings like a consensus. So they voted again. It took time, but, after all, this is what Kuralt called "hallowed ground." It was democracy at work. Exactly 120 votes were cast. Pauline needed 61 to win.

Sixty-two.

It doesn't get any better'n that. ◇