

Frank Bryan Speaks on Jefferson, Democracy and Town Meeting

“The revival of town meeting democracy is not only desirable, it’s inevitable” was the central message given by Frank Bryan to the Institute’s 2005 Jefferson Day Dinner guests.

Bryan, a longtime UVM Professor of Political Science and member of the EAI Advisory Council, took as his topic “Jefferson, Democracy, and Town Meeting.” Last year Bryan published his major academic work, *Town Meeting Democracy* (University of Chicago Press), and this year just released, with co-author Susan Clark, *All Those in Favor: Rediscovering the Secrets of Town Meeting and Community* (available in all real Vermont bookstores.)

Bryan began by discussing Mr. Jefferson’s passion for “ward republics”, the little political units where citizens came face to face to govern themselves. He heaped abuse on politicians who hold “town meetings”, which are no more than public forums at which not a bit of self government is in evidence.

The key thing, Bryan said, is to keep important decisions at the local community level, not strip them away to Montpelier or Washington, leaving people with nothing to decide but dog licenses and culverts. Local people can and will make mistakes, Bryan conceded, but the biggest mistake of

all is to exclude citizens from their duties as decision makers over things that are important to them and their communities.

He told the dinner guests in the Sheraton Burlington Emerald Ballroom that after decades of decline, town meeting democracy is poised to make a strong comeback. People want the responsibility of governing themselves face to face, because it enriches their lives and gives them a dutiful sense of power to make a difference.

As a classroom teacher for nearly three decades, Bryan said he believes strongly in the importance of having students together in the same room, so the professor can read their eyes and body language as concepts are discussed. He said he taught a few classes through interactive television, and found it very difficult and unsatisfying. So it is with “technological

democracy”, where people express their preferences electronically from different locations instead of exchanging views with fellow citizens in the flesh.

The Institute’s Jefferson Day Dinner was once again cosponsored by the Jefferson Legacy Foundation, based in Ripton. JLF President Chip Stokes spoke briefly on the Foundation’s current work, and donated five Jefferson books for door prizes.

A special guest was New York businessman Reginald Jones, a recording and talent executive who spoke earlier in the day to students at St. Michael’s College on how capitalism, not government programs, produces opportunity and wealth for black Americans. He was hosted by SMC Prof. of Business Dick Kuklis, a member of the Institute’s Advisory Council.



Jefferson on Local Self-government

“My bill for the more general diffusion of learning had for a further object to impart to these wards those portions of self government for which they are best qualified, by confiding to them the care of their poor, their roads, police, elections, the nomination of jurors, administration of justice in small cases, elementary exercises of militia; in short, to have made them little republics, with a warden at the head of each, for all those concerns which, being under their eye, they would better managed than the larger republics of the country or state. A general call of ward meetings by their wardens on the same day through the state, would at any time produce the genuine sense of the people on any required point, and would enable the State to act in mass as people [of New England] have so often done, and with so much effect by their town meetings.” (To John Adams, 1813)