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"That frequent recurrence to fundamental principles, and a firm adherence to justice, moderation, temperance industry, and frugality, are absolutely necessary to preserve the blessings of liberty, and keep government free."

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Monday, February 28, 2005

Town meetings

If a blizzard hits us tomorrow, Town Meeting Day, all sorts of complications will arise. Attendance will be very small, comparatively, and important issues will be decided only by groups that feel some issues are so important that they must vote regardless of the weather. Also, in many places the poll officials are on the older side, and driving through heavy snowfall is often distasteful to such people.

Towns such as Tinmouth held their open meetings on the weekend, but town officers and some major issues like bonding have been warned for March 1 and the vote must take place on that day.

School districts can shut down for a day of heavy snow when the buses would have a difficult time getting around. It's too bad the governor doesn't have authority to declare a statewide emergency on a blizzardy Town Meeting Day and postpone the opening of the polls until a later date. Perhaps he should have responsibility for making partial postponements, depending on whether a blizzard covers the state or only parts of it.

The statutes would have to be changed considerably to allow for that kind of flexibility and the rules governing the warnings of election for various officers and issues would need a lot of adjustment to allow for postponement legality.

As a matter of fact, it might be a good idea to change the date of Town Meeting Day from being always on the first Tuesday in March to a day on a specified weekend, such as the last Saturday in February or the first Saturday in March. More people would be able to come to the open meetings and polling places on a weekend with-

out having to miss most of a day at work.

The Vermont Sunday Magazine of the Herald and Times Argus carried excerpts from a book on this state's town meetings, written by Susan Clark, a Vermont educator, and Frank Bryan, a UVM political science professor. They offer many insights as to the advantages and disadvantages of the Vermont system, and find that the advantages far outweigh the drawbacks.

You often hear the expression that the Australian ballot method of voting is more democratic because it gives more people a chance to participate. Clark and Bryan will have none of that. This is what they say:

"Use the Australian ballot as little as possible. In a well-intentioned effort to include more people in decision-making, an increasing number of Vermont towns are destroying their town meeting in the process. The Australian ballot allows citizens to avoid town meeting altogether . . . We are told it will save town meeting, while the reality is that it poisons it and lets it die slowly . . ."

The poison of the Australian ballot was never more clearly demonstrated than for the Mill River Union High School district. When the district was formed, its annual meetings took place when people gathered at the school and voted by voice. District budgets usually passed. With the excuse that Australian ballot would increase participation that system was installed — and almost immediately the budgets began to be defeated. At least once the district had to go to the voters six times in one year. The "no" voters didn't have to stand up and argue their position in front of their neighbors. Clark and Bryan make that point clearly.