

F R A N K B R Y A N
S P E A K S H I S M I N D

al . Vermonters n't Live in eme rks

From tourism to town meeting, this University of Vermont professor has a lot to say about almost everything.

BY DENNIS JENSEN

THE MAN SEATED BEHIND the wheel of the battered, 1983 Chevette could just as well have been a carpenter or a factory worker. Dressed in work clothes, he fit in so well on the main street of the blue-collar town of Bristol that I looked right at Frank Bryan and still didn't recognize him.

A political science professor at the University of Vermont, the author of *Real Vermonters Don't Milk Goats*, persistent critic of big government and arguably the No. 1 authority on Vermont's great tradition of Town Meeting Day, Bryan is a man who defies expectation.

Burly and hairy, Bryan is built more like a logger than a college professor. When he speaks, the expletives drop like dead leaves in November, whether the subject be politics or Vermont history or deer hunting, all of which he knows something about.

While he longs for a Vermont of the 1950's when big government stayed out of people's business, Bryan at age 60 is old enough and savvy enough to know that "progress" is here to stay. The trick, he says, is to put some kind of sensible control on urban sprawl, on big government, without infringing on the rights of Vermonters.

On Civil Unions: "Probably constitutional; probably a good thing. Probably won't cause as much trouble as people thought it would. But another thing I think is really important: When you overturn 2,500 years of Judeo-Christian tradition in three months without asking anybody, why are you surprised when the s--- hits the fan? I have great sympathy for 'Take Back Vermont.' Not because of the issue but because I think it reflected something a lot deeper and more profound, which is these people's feeling that they'd been had. A lot of the intolerance was on the other side. They were intolerant of the Vermonters. They weren't tolerant about the passions of the majority of those people. We're not bigots."

mother converted to Catholicism.

This all took place during the 1950's, a time when the state was economically depressed but, at the same time, isolated and insulated from the woes of the outside world. It was a time when a boy with a rifle could hunt where he damn well pleased, when "nobody posted their land," Bryan says. He laments the loss of that time and the encroachment of development. But he's not ready to give up yet: he still believes that the qualities that make Vermont special can be salvaged if the people want it badly enough. His politics, he says, are "communitarian," which he describes as a philosophical position that lies somewhere between liberal and conservative. "I like government the way a liberal likes government," says Bryan by way of explanation. "But when it gets too big, I become a conservative."

BRYAN ALSO TAKES A CONTRARY view of certain political events that have

"A disaster. I think it's going to remove from the towns the one last tax they have for themselves, that is the property tax. It hasn't happened yet, but I think it will. I believe in the slippery slope here. It inevitably will lead to more statewide control of education, more statewide standards, more statewide interference with local schools. It will hurt public education. I oppose vouchers; I oppose school choice. I think communities ought to have schools; I think kids ought to go to schools in those communities. I'm with the left, the liberals and the Democrats, on public education. I don't approve of what the Republicans are doing. I believe in local control."

Act 250 (Vermont's 30-year-old land-use law):

"Governor Deane Davis originally conceived it, back in the early 70s. Under its original purposes, it worked really well: Make sure that development is as rational as it can be and clean. Davis looked at a development in one of these ski towns in southern Vermont and looked at the condos built on rock bases and asked, 'Where is the s— going to go?' What's different now is it has been highly bureaucratized. It hurts small developments, small business people, a lot more than mega-corporations, which can afford to have the time and lawyers on staff to get through it [the bureaucratic red tape]. But some guy trying to parcel out his own farm over in Barnard, he's got trouble."

put Vermont in the national spotlight in recent years, in particular the brief but high-profile U.S. Senate candidacy of Fred Tuttle. A farmer-turned-movie star, Tuttle captured the national imagination with his successful native versus non-native campaign against Republican candidate Jack McMullen, a wealthy businessman recently come to Vermont. In the end, the seat went to Democratic incumbent Patrick Leahy, as everyone knew it would.

While the rest of Vermont smiled at Tuttle's antics, Bryan had a different take on the matter. McMullen "had it coming," he says. "It was a delicious moment. It could only happen in Vermont."

But the political sideshow also troubled him. In Bryan's view, "Vermont is becoming just kind of a theme park of the past, and Fred is becoming a symbol of that and

he's being used to promote that." As he sees it, there is a great divide between the reality of Vermont and the media image of Vermont, and to him the Tuttle campaign exemplified that.

"We're trying to create a rural, pastoral ambience in Vermont," Bryan says. "We have a vision of the small town, the First Congregational church steeple, the little clustered community, like the old days. The people are sitting on their porches; they're making bread."

While he believes that most Vermonters cherish that vision and would like to make it real again, he also contends that the vision cannot be achieved by means of regulations generated in Montpelier. Furthermore, he argues that a realistic picture of Vermont must include the nitty-gritty reality of the Vermonters who live in mobile homes on back roads.

I think we know what we want Vermont to look like," he says. "I don't think we know what we want Vermont to be, as a society."

He grew up in the company of hard-working people. To him, those are "the people who made Vermont interesting, the Fred Tuttle, the classics. These are people I grew up with, and worked with in the

On Sen. James Jeffords:
"Jim Jeffords has been whining about Republicans ever since 1972. Jeffords has portrayed himself as the Jimmy Stewart of America, but everything he is in politics he owes to the Republican Party. He has been hostile to Republicans forever. The question to me [on leaving the Republican Party] is, 'Why now?' Reagan treated him a lot worse than Bush has treated him. I think, quite frankly, a lot has to do with age and perspective. I think this would be his last term. I understand it. He's just pissed off. I get that way. I'm too old to take this crap any more. I don't think it's an act of courage. This guy is a god in Vermont. He can get 80 percent of the vote."

woods. They're the farmers with the big guts and the loggers you see at the Tunbridge World's Fair. And I love them for what they are, and not for what they represent.

"And then they're people, in all goodness of heart, who want to keep Vermont bucolic, like it used to be, who like Fred Tuttle in theory, but who would not like Fred Tuttle living next door to them. They wouldn't be inviting Fred over for crumpets and Chablis in the evening. They're the very people who want farms but don't want to smell the manure. I felt a little bit had about the whole Fred Tuttle election. I thought we used Fred."

Bryan's remedy for the ills of modern life is a big dose of the 1950's, "the whole life that I grew up in. It still makes me weep with joy when I think about it. I really believe I lived in Vermont at the best possible time. I grew up in the fifties. Jesus, it was wonderful. You could roam. You could

hunt anywhere. You could fish anywhere. Nobody protected their land. When I went deer hunting, I'd walk across six people's property. Nobody gave it a thought. That was beautiful and I want to protect that."

As the number of dairy farms continues to decline in Vermont, Bryan can imagine the state someday operating a number of visible, picturesque dairy farms along major highways as a tourist attraction, a photo opportunity for them as they motor through the "theme park that is becoming Vermont."

As further evidence of his "theme park" theory, Bryan points to the new Vermont quarter. It features a man tending sap buckets hanging from sugar maple trees with the profile of Camel's Hump in the background.

"Very smart, hard working, very ambitious. He treats politics like an engineer would, in that he's technically sound, practical, has a lot of common sense. But he's not a visionary. I don't really think he knows why he wanted to be governor for the long run interests of Vermont, although he is certainly a good person who wants to make the government work well."

The quarter represents a Vermont that is "fine and good, showing the human scale, the small farm," Bryan says. "Trouble is, 80 percent of Vermont's maple syrup that's made . . . comes through plastic tubing. We didn't show the plastic tubing, did we? We showed the buckets. That's a metaphor for what we're doing. That's what I mean by a theme park."

While the upscale newcomers who have settled here over the past 20 years seem to embrace the theme park concept, he argues that the symbol for "the real Ver-

On Tourists : "Keep coming and spend. And leave. But you don't want to be mean-spirited about this. There is a moment, isn't there, right after the leaves fall? It's early November when you can see into the woods because the leaves are down. The goldenrod's dead. The tourists have gone home. It's kind of lonely. I love Vermont in early November. It's gonna be just us. We're gonna have to live through the winter. Deer season's coming. But after that it's just three months of miserable cold and that's a nice moment."

monsters is a "Take Back Vermont" sign."

The self-reliant, independent, don't-try-to-tell-us-what-to-do Vermont still exists, Bryan says, but you have to travel up into the Northeast Kingdom – to Orleans, Franklin and Essex counties, as well northern Caledonia County – to find it. "I do a lot of trout fishing in Essex County, deep into the Kingdom, and it's still circa 1950's in Vermont," he says.

He sometimes fantasizes about just chucking the job and the homestead to go fishing. "I'm at the age now that I can say, 'I'll just get the hell out of here and head up to the Kingdom,'" he says. "But do I want to spend the last 10 years of my life watching the 'Chittendenization' of the Kingdom? I don't think it's inevitable, but it's going to take strong political leadership" to turn things around.

BRYAN DOESN'T JUST TALK about being a Vermonter. He lives like one – with his wife, Melissa, who teaches at Burlington High School, two dogs and two oxen on 78 acres in Starksboro. They have seven grown children. He knows about physical labor, having cleared fields for farmers in his youth. He drops, cuts and splits eight cords of firewood for each coming winter. Like the old Vermonters he reveres, he has no backup heating system.

One of his favorite days of the year is the first Tuesday in March – Town Meeting Day. He believes that town meeting is one of the great Vermont traditions – imperfect but still an example of local government at its best, just like the state. He travels around the state, lecturing about the significance of Vermont town meetings. "To me, town meeting is glorious because it's real. It's real democracy and it exposes ass-----s for being ass-----s and it exposes courage when there's courage. And it exposes evil when there's evil," he says. "A lot of people, like reporters or academics or out-of-staters will say, 'Jesus, this isn't as good as it was supposed to be.' But this is pure democracy. We didn't say it was good; we said it was pure. There's a difference. S—'s pure, but it's pure s—. If you're at town meeting, it's easier to expose the jerks."

Bryan believes that town meetings can bring out the best, or the worst, in people. "There is a psychic cost to it. You may have to get up and argue against your neighbor," he says. "Going to town meeting is like going to church. You're not sure it did any good, but you feel better."

He is elated that his latest book, *Real*

Democracy: What it Looks Like, How it Works, will be published by the University of Chicago Press. "It's the first in-depth book on town meeting ever," he says. "It's a kind of a small-is-beautiful book."

Smallness is something he believes in, which raises his question in his mind: with a small population and a "very, very small tax base, will we sell our soul to pay the price of modernism?"

"State government and industry have a history of going out of state to find experts to solve the state's problems," he says. But in his view, Vermonters are educated and savvy enough to devise homegrown solutions to the challenges of restraining sprawl and developing enough clean, small industry to provide good jobs for their children. Citizens, he says, not politicians or bureaucrats, should be the ones to lead the way. "Bureaucrats like complexity the same way a big buck likes a cedar swamp," Bryan says with a laugh. "They're both protected."

He believes that Chittenden County, densely populated and jammed with traffic much of the time, should serve as a warning to the rest of the state that unless something is done now, the whole state may fall victim to sprawl, hidden in places by theme-park areas dedicated to tourism. "Chittenden County already has sold its soul... for economic progress, for comfort, for psychological comfort," he cautions. "And here's the irony: It sold its soul to pave the roads."

He also frets about Act 60 and the impact it will have on local schools. "We're going to lose our community schools. I think that's one of the real big problems facing Vermont today," he says. "You have to keep democracy in the school system. Common people have to govern. The problem with Act 60 is it's going to make the schools elitist. The upscale families will find a way to get their kids benefits. You and I would, too, if we had the resources, because we love our kids more than we love our neighbors."

He buys the argument that state and federal government has an important role to play, but only on the big issues of the day – clean air and clean water, for instance – and only up to a point. "I'm not talking about cosmetics," he says. "Keep the air clear, the water clean, and that's it. Don't worry about how the state looks. Don't pick on the small guy."

Bryan believes that Vermont can limit population growth "without draconian means and without being elitist about it.

On Sen. Patrick Leahy:

"A good senator."

On Rep. Bernie Sanders:

"I like Bernie for the reason everybody likes Bernie. He's never backed down from his positions. He's the only guy I ever actually did a campaign ad for. And I did it because he was running against Peter Smith, another establishment Republican, I thought, like Jim Jeffords, who would take any position he could to stay in the middle. I think America needs Bernie Sanders in Congress. He's one guy – a working-class, lunch-pail representative – raising hell."

But you've got to learn... that you can't have everything. Deal with the dust [on dirt roads]. Deal with the cold. If you come here, it's going to be tough."

The Vermonters who came here after 1980, who saw the boom years and who cheered the new highways and strip development in Chittenden County, want the best of all worlds, Bryan says. But development has its cost, the greatest of which is doing away with Vermont's farms, its scenery, its open spaces, its independent, cranky people and, yes, the rich smell of spread manure drifting down the valley on a hot August afternoon.

If you want to live in Vermont, he says, "You've got to put up with different people: hunters, farmers, gun-toters, pro-civil union people, people who give you the indecent gesture like 'Take Back Vermont.' That's what Vermont is all about.

"Chittenden County destroyed itself by fixing its highways. You've got to make life hard. There's no way around it. If you make it too easy, if you build it, they will come."

"Who is 'they?'" I ask him.

"Damn near everybody who isn't here."

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