

Burlington Free Press

Published March 4, 2007

Women rule at town meeting

By Frank Bryan
For the Free Press

Do town meetings fairly represent all the citizens? To make this comparison, consider the largest group in society that is the most underrepresented in legislative bodies across America -- women.

Women are a numerical majority in America, but they hold fewer than 20 percent of the seats in Congress! Worse, no woman elected from Vermont has ever voted in the legislative halls of the nation on budgets and taxes and public policies that form the agenda.

In the 2005-2006 session of the Legislature in Montpelier, the ratio of women to men was twice as good as Washington's. But still, only one-third of its members were women.

Consider instead the little town of Waterville. In 2006 women occupied 61 percent of the seats at town meeting -- nearly twice as many as in the state Legislature. In this government women had numerical control over every issue -- budgets, taxes, contributions to social services, road equipment -- everything.

In towns all over Vermont women were in the majority in the town's legislature. They held 59 percent of the seats in the Addison County town of Salisbury and the Northeast Kingdom's town of Newark. In Fairfax, Peacham and Morristown, women occupied 55 percent of the seats; in Starksboro, Morgan and Newbury, 54 percent. Rochester, Ripton and Belvidere had 53 percent. In almost half of the towns (23 of the 50) my students and I studied last year, women were in the majority.

Women ruled!

Where else in America -- indeed, where else on the planet -- can that be said?

-- Frank Bryan