The True Congress

By Frank Bryan

“Town meeting is the true Congress, the most respectable one ever assembled in the United States.”

Henry David Thoreau, Reform Papers, 1835

The time has come for Vermont to lead America away from the centralist, hierarchical and fundamentally inhuman social and political structures mandated by the age of industrialism and toward Leopold Kohr’s “world of a thousand flags” – a world not of fewer mega-states thirsting for power, consumed by greed and driven by paranoia, but more, many more, and smaller, much smaller, nations based on humanity, modesty, and trust.

The urban industrial paradigm is behind us. A new human scale paradigm is rising on the near horizon.

Why Vermont?
The reasons abound. But fundamental to them all is this: None of the world’s political structures (unitary states like France or federal states like America and its sub-units, like Vermont) is more democratically governed at its roots than Vermont.

Why is this so? Two words: Town Meeting.

A bold claim to be sure. But true. Consider the words of Ferdinand Lundberg in his The Myth of Democracy, an exhaustive historical review of the absence of democracy in the world’s great nations from ancient Athens to modern America. “Here [in the town meeting] more than anywhere else one finds democracy at work.” In fact Lundberg notes that the town meeting is the only case of real democracy he has found, saying that when the Old World transplants in colonial New England created town meeting, it was “the first time ever in the history of the world” democracy was systematically practiced. And he might have said as well (with a tip of the hat to Maine and New Hampshire): no New England state still practices town meeting democracy – the real democracy the Greeks attempted but failed to realize in Athens – as well as or as thoroughly as Vermont.

Why town meeting?

Democracy, real town meeting democracy (and the many variants of town meeting democracy that are surely coming) is essential because the ascendant global paradigm must be and will be democratic. While the urban-industrial model fea-

Independence Begins at Home

By Peter Clavelle

We have all heard that “charity begins at home.” Charles Dickens popularized that phrase more than 120 years ago. In the year 2006 it is time to coin a new adage: “Independence begins at home.” It is time to breathe new life and meaning into the idea of independence, into the spirit of democracy. And there is no place more fitting to launch this new independence movement than right here in the State and the 251 communities of Vermont.

The Second Vermont Republic has certainly stirred some interest. This quest to return Vermont to the status of independent republic – a status held from 1777 to 1791 – has sparked thought and generated controversy. I, too, find appeal in the vision of a Vermont that practices direct democracy, fosters sustainability, and promotes economic self-sufficiency. But the Green Mountain Independence movement must begin at home. We must first achieve independence within Vermont, transforming the relationship between state government and Vermont’s communities and their citizens.

Vermonters will gather in cities and towns across the state on March 7th for Town Meeting Day. This annual exercise will be touted as true democracy, as grassroots decision-making. Yet this remains a myth. The reality is much different. Vermonters have little control over how we govern ourselves.

Where do we start? Here are six steps we can take now to secure true democracy and move toward Vermont independence.

1. Amend Vermont’s Constitution. Since 1791, the cities and towns of Vermont have been denied the right to govern themselves in affairs that should be locally determined. Among all fifty states, Vermont stands as one with the most centralized of governments. Cities and towns remain creatures of the state – with Vermont’s Constitution specifically stipulating that municipalities “are to be and remain under the patronage or control of the State.” Most states in this country (36 of them) have now granted local governments the ability to determine their own destinies. A Home Rule amendment to the Vermont Constitution is long overdue.

2. Authorize Local Option Taxes. Vermont citizens must have more authority to decide how

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REVIVING TOWN MEETING

UTNE READER

2005 Independent Press Award

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FINAL NOMINEE

Vermont Commons is a print and online forum for exploring the idea of Vermont independence — political, economic, social, and spiritual. Look for us the last Friday of every month in the Vermont Guardian, and visit our website at www.vtcommons.org. We are unaffiliated with any other organization or media, and interested in all points of view. We welcome your letters, thoughts, and participation.

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• Peak Oil and the Empire
• Jon Gaiinor’s MP3 “Town Meeting Tune”

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The Center Cannot Hold

This month Vermont Commons delves into the nature of government: small government.

In his article, “Republicanism and Size,” Don Livingston informs us that small size is not only a factor in defining good government, but a requirement for its very existence. Not only does a state need to be of appropriate size to hang onto its culture, sovereignty, legal egalitarianism and general well being; smallness allows it to generate the virtues of a humane society in the first place.

The size of government determines its function. The function determines its size. SMALL countries DO NOT pursue colonial or imperial ambitions because, being small, such ambitions prove out of the question. On the other hand, they may prefer being small because they do not have colonial or imperial ambitions. After all, with one glaring exception, the 21st-century world appears to have rejected empire building, and acknowledged the sovereignty of all states, large and small.

Our 18th-Century founders puzzled over how to keep the individual (United) States sovereign and, at the same time, to provide for the common defense and to maintain the liberties THEY won from the British Empire at the expense of so much blood and treasure.

This concern, alas, seems moot today in realpolitik terms, because our once-sovereign states, including Vermont, have lost much of their autonomy with few of our citizens appearing to notice or care. The states are no longer governed by their legal and rightful sovereigns in the most crucial realms of decision making. And the federal government, by the way, is not the republic it originally set out to be, because 1) with paraded exceptions, it and its office-holders are above the law; 2) it is not answerable to the people; and 3) it is too big.

In this March 2006 “Reviving Town Meeting” issue, citizens observing our Vermont independence movement are attempting to rekindle the 18th-Century ideals of liberty and republicanism – ideals with which few disagree and which most applaud, but which, nevertheless, have been trampled by the proud hooves of aggressive nation-states.

Historically, citizens have appeared negligent as these monsters devoured their individual rights, corrupted their institutions, and doomed them, as Ethan Allen said, “to perpetual slavery in consequence of yielding up to tyrants their natural born liberties.”

Our 18th-century founders wrote eloquently and often that tyranny doesn’t just happen. It is driven by some, welcomed by many, ignored by most, and resisted by few. Is it inertia that carries us down this path? Living things are not inert. They are supposed to be capable of reacting. What is the nature of our species? What kind of beings are we when, knowing what we do is wrong, knowing that our system is corrupt, we remain inert?

What we have obtained by inheritance we esteem too lightly.

And today, we as once-sovereign citizens appeal to the imperial monster that destroys our liberties, when a far, far better tactic is possible, bringing independence within our grasp.

That tactic is a resolution, now in the works in Vermont and nationwide, to give our once-sovereign states a means of interposing themselves between said state’s citizens and the unconstitutional illegalities of imperial executive and federal legislative authority.

In plain terms, the resolution would draw a line in the sand. As I write, members of the Second Vermont Republic are busy composing this document with the help of citizen activists and constitutional scholars of all stripes.

It is a resolution of “prior dissent.” The concept is well established in United States law through the 1798 Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions (and stated as well in the Vermont Declaration of Independence). It pushes a state’s legislature to act in the event of egregious and illegal unconstitutional behavior exhibited by federal authorities.

The mechanism is simple: should the federal government (executive or legislative) invoke certain expansive but unconstitutional authority (for example, imposing martial law, engaging in preemptive strikes against other nations, suspending...
habeas corpus or activating other agreed-upon triggers) we the people of each sovereign state have the constitutional duty, through our elected state representatives, to declare our sovereignty and refuse to accept, participate in, or obey such illegal or unconstitutional mandates.

One consequence of their 18th-Century defeat at the hands of American revolutionary secessionists was that the British imperial authorities learned that power must be tempered by some degree of humanity and wisdom; it must be decentralized and localized. Had they considered colonial petitions, allowed their subjects greater autonomy, and afforded the colonial leaders the respect they deserved, the English colonies may not have seceded.

By the same token, if our own federal government were acting legally, and with some humanity or wisdom, we would not have a persuasive case. But troubling events prove otherwise.

Discussions of such events have filled volumes, but I would be remiss if I didn’t name but a few, including 2000 electoral shenanigans and the subsequent hijackings of said election by the federal Supreme Court; 9/11 and the encouragement of domestic “terrorism” against U.S. citizens – itself an act of treason; the passage of the so-called Help America Vote Act (2002), which has led to massive (and still unprosecuted) national election fraud in 2004; war profiteering; domestic spying; and massive corporate corruption – enriching a few global movement maintain that the federal government crossed the line dividing law and lawlessness a long time ago.

Despite Constitutional guarantees, the rights of the people to protect themselves, to provide for themselves, and to govern themselves, have been quashed time and time again.

The U.S. Constitution – the contract between U.S. citizens and the federal government – has been violated.

We have a very brief opportunity to act. We have nothing to lose, as the U.S. Constitution works for us and against them; and we have a state constitution, dating from 1777, to support us and carry us into the future.

IF we allow them to destroy the U.S. Constitution, that demolition job will abolish what few fig leaves the states have left, and then we, the people, will be defenseless.

Make no mistake, they are working on it. And that is why we must act now.

Now it is they who are stretched to the limit. We are at our strongest. The whole world is on our side, and we need only to claim what is ours.

If not now, when?

The rules of the game have changed. Let us acknowledge this. Let us wake up and reclaim our sovereignty.

In their over-reaching, ignorance and greed, the neo-cons are the ones who have given us this chance, because they will not let go.

They have not learned the first rule of empire or baseball: “The center cannot hold.”

JIM HOGUE

Letter to the Editor

Editor, Vermont Commons:

First, A Statement of Grievances

I was a participant in the Vermont Independence Convention held on 28th October 2005 in the State House in Montpelier, VT. I spoke briefly there advocating a gradualist approach with regard to secession, and I would like to expand on that notion.

Secession is a means, not an end. An end is something like justice, peace, or the pursuit of happiness. Secession is a tool, a blunt instrument, and necessarily the last resort. A people secedes, as the Confederate states did in 1861 and the American colonists did in the 1776, only when all other remedies are exhausted. Before the Second Vermonter Republic can become a reality it must present compellingly demonstrate to the people of Vermont that their grievances are intolerable and cannot otherwise be addressed.

What are those grievances? What has the federal government done to Vermont that would justify secession as the remedy?

Since secession involves the rejection of the United States Constitution which Vermont has accepted since 1791, it is only proper to frame the grievances of Vermont, and the remedies it seeks, in Constitutional terms.

Consider, then, the following draft resolution:

Vermont Secession Resolution

WHEREAS, the independent and sovereign state of Vermont entered freely into the federal union of the United States as the 14th state in 1791, and may freely and constitutionally withdraw from that union, and WHEREAS, the purpose of that union for Vermont was to protect the democratic freedoms and economic opportunities then exercised within Vermont by its citizens, and WHEREAS, in recent decades those democratic freedoms and economic opportunities have been reduced in Vermont and other states to an unacceptable degree by the unconstitutional and arbitrary usurpation of powers by the federal government of the United States, including:

1. The prosecution of illegal wars by the federal government, including the War on Terror, in Iraq and elsewhere, without a declaration of war by Congress, in violation of Article 1, Section 8, of the United States Constitution, and,
2. The calling forth of the Vermont National Guard and other state militias to engage in such illegal wars, also in violation of Article 1, Section 8, of the Constitution, where Congress alone is given the power to call forth state militias, and
3. The unconstitutional suspension of habeas corpus in Vermont and other states by the PATRIOT Act and other acts, in violation of Article 1, Section 9 of the Constitution, which requires “Rebellion or Invasion” to justify any such suspension, neither of which has occurred, and
4. The elimination, by other federal actions too numerous to mention, of important local and state democratic rights of self-determination in many areas of life – including representation by towns in the state government, local civil liberties, health care, education, transportation, environmental protection, natural resources, agriculture, taxation, commerce, and finance, among others,

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The following is an interview with Susan Clark, author of All Those In Favor: Rediscovering the Secrets of Town Meeting and Community (Ravenmark, 2005). It was conducted for Vermont Commons by Editor Rob Williams.

VC: You say that your new book about Vermont town meeting is a “call to action.” What do you mean by this? S.C.: We need to act, because Vermonters are losing our collective voice. In recent years, Vermonters – both at the individual and at the town level – are letting go of our traditional, face-to-face town meetings. Increasingly, we’re moving to the Australian ballot system; or we’re shifting decisions to the state or national level; or we’re just not showing up at all when decisions get made.

I first got the idea for All Those In Favor because my own town of Middletown was contemplating moving to Australian ballot. I wanted one good source that laid out the arguments on this.

My son was just a little baby at that point, so like a lot of parents of young families, I had no time for reading and I had the attention span of a gnat. But I knew it wasn’t just me; people who are working two jobs, people who are trying to keep body and soul together – a lot of Vermonters don’t feel we have time for democracy.

I knew [UVM professor] Frank Bryan’s book Real Democracy was just coming out and I thought some of his research could help activists if it was accompanied by advice.

Why is town meeting important? Let’s put it in a few hundred words.

What can we do right now to save it? Put it into ten tips.

The impacts go beyond Vermont. Frank makes a remarkable, compelling case for the connection between how we govern ourselves locally and at the state level – what it can mean for the world – the link between town meeting and our prospects for survival as a species.

Vermont’s democratic system is a beacon, in a world that really needs beacons.

Our message really is one of hope.

There is so much Vermont mythology that has grown up around the concept of “town meeting.” What are the realities of the “town meeting” situation in 21st century Vermont?

To answer this, we drew from the research Frank Bryan and his UVM political science students have done during the last 30 years. Readers who know Frank for his inspiring (and often hilarious) writing might be surprised to know what a data geek he is. His correlation coefficient scatterplot variable yada-yada will make your eyes cross. But he’s created this synthesis of hundreds and hundreds of Vermont town meetings that’s extraordinarily valuable. We should use his work as a blueprint.

For instance, everyone knows that socio-economic factors have a huge effect at the voting booth. Higher-income, better-educated people are more likely to vote.

But guess what? Something about town meeting is a great leveler. There is no link between a town’s attendance at, or verbal participation in, its town meeting, and any of its socio-economic indicators. We should be shouting this to the sky, because of course, class bias of any kind diminishes democracy.

But guess what? There is no link between a town’s attendance at, or verbal participation in, its town meeting, and any of its socio-economic indicators. We should be shouting this to the sky, because of course, class bias of any kind diminishes democracy.

You might assume that people are afraid of diversity. But in fact there is no link between town meeting attendance and whether a town is filled with people from lots of different socio-economic backgrounds. And this is one of town meeting’s greatest gifts: it brings people from all walks of life together, face-to-face, and makes us identify and work toward our common goals. This combination makes a social scientists’ heart beat faster, because there is simply no better prescription for true, sustainable community-building.

What suggestions does your book offer for improving the culture of “town meetings” in 21st Century Vermont?

We examine the Australian ballot. There are well-meaning people on both sides of this argument, and Vermonters should all decide for themselves where they come down. But we come out against it. It shuts off deliberation and cramps citizens’ power, reducing us to little more than rubber stamps. Australian ballot increases the quantity of voters, but not by much; meanwhile, the reduction in the quality of our democracy is enormous. We admit that town meeting works better in smaller towns, and we offer alternatives, such as the Representative Town Meeting (Brattleboro model) for larger communities.

We urge businesses to give people time off to participate in town meeting. There are now bills in the legislature (S. 210 and S. 219) that would allow us to treat town meeting attendance as we do jury duty – time off from work without being penalized. Seems like the least we can do for our democracy, doesn’t it? Sit down and write your legislators about this.

We make a case for “creative localism,” reminding our state leaders that local governments are the best place for citizens to engage, and more decision-making power should remain at the local level.

I interviewed dozens of Vermonters about what makes their town meetings sing, and we offer specific action steps you can take locally, today. For instance:

• Offer child care; you can improve participation measurably, especially among women.
• Highlight the most important decisions that will be made at town meeting this year; don’t let them get hidden in the bowels of the budget.
• Include elements of celebration; acknowledge people’s work, and say thank you.
• Write a welcome letter to every person who was added to the voter checklist this year, explaining and personally inviting them to town meeting.
• Help your town make a great town report.

Design a nice cover, supply photos, or make a pie chart to show the data in a more understandable way – whatever skills you have that will help bring folks in.

• Buy our book, read it, and then give it to your local library or your selectboard. Heck, buy a bunch and start a study group! (I can be shameless about this because all proceeds go to support democracy-education programs.) And if you start that study group, bring cookies; food at every meeting is another one of our tips.

• Attend your town meeting, and bring a friend.

One of the last chapters in your book is called “The Other 364 Days.” Say more.

Think about the unique elements of town meeting: that local people have direct decision-making power; that we break down the formality of “public life” through things like the pot-luck supper. We can learn from these things, and carry those lessons with us throughout the year.

So we recommend creativity in inviting democratic participation. Think beyond the 7 p.m. public hearing – how about field trips, living room discussions, work parties? Think beyond the traditional learning styles – not everyone learns by being talked at, so we should involve visuals, hands-on examples, and other ways of helping citizens explore tough concepts. We provide examples of creative publicity and outreach, and innovative ways to celebrate each community’s unique aspects.

And it works both ways. Look at data on civic health – things like neighborliness, trust, tolerance, reciporcity. Five out of the six New England states – the only places where town meeting is fully practiced – rank in the top 10 for civil society. And Vermont usually lands in the top three, often ranking number one. The circumstantial evidence is overwhelming: the way we govern ourselves, through our face-to-face town meetings, affects how we live together the rest of the year.

As a student of Vermont’s local political culture, how do you feel about Vermont independence?

I knew you’d ask me this! But I must confess I’m not sure how to answer.

I love America’s history – the people’s history.

And I grieve when I see what is happening to our democratic system over time; it’s the same feeling as if a dear member of my family has been diagnosed with life-threatening cancer. Now the question is, do we leave? Or do we stay by the deathbed, despite the bleak prognosis, and hope against hope that we can nurture a recovery?

People look to Vermont as a model of integrity, common sense, and honest civility. We lead in a way that is out of proportion to our size. So, whether we leave America’s sick-bed or not, Vermont’s discussions about independence are healthy and health-giving. We celebrate our civic heritage. We are specific about what we know to be right and wrong.

We talk about possibility and hope. And we will see where it takes us.
Memoirs of a Moderator

By John McClaughry

I was thus enormously relieved to overhear a white-haired gent, in the line at the pot luck luncheon, observe to the person ahead of him: “He ain’t from around hyuh, but he’s a hick from somewhuhuh.”

Another interesting moment in local democracy occurred in the early 1970s. The legislature had given towns the option of exempting livestock (cows) from property taxation. The town had to make its choice. The dairy farmers thought that their cows ought to be exempt. Thanks to the farms, the town enjoyed open space, landscapes, and the rural character that we all valued. Dairy farming is a tough business. The tax exemption would strengthen farm balance sheets a little, and encourage farmers to keep on farming.

This argument was heard respectfully. No one wanted to say no to the dairy farmers, in Kirby much admired. But exempting the cows meant that everyone else would have to pick up the tax burden. Other folks were pinched financially as well. Some were retired on fixed incomes. Some had to drive considerable distances for jobs paying very modest wages. Some were out of work, or had a lot of mouthes to feed.

There were no angry speeches, no finger pointing, no harsh words. Little by little, the farmers saw that they were asking a bit too much. A motion was made to exempt half the cows on each farm. Duly voted.

And so the people of Kirby worked out what to do about the town truck, and how to distribute the property-tax burden. Small matters. Insignificant matters. Yes, but in a different way, very important matters.

For every freeman attending those meetings, and many others, understood that “I am a free Vermont and a citizen of my town. I have the right to stand and speak my piece. I have the opportunity and the duty to work with my fellow citizens toward an outcome that, after debate and reflection, seems right and fair for all of us. In much of America and the world, democracy is little more than casting ballots. Here, real democracy rules.”

This core belief among those who venerate town meeting is the wellspring of every free, just and progressive society. Admittedly, town meeting as held in Kirby won’t work when towns get too large. But if the spirit of our free institutions is to survive and flourish, Vermonters need to find ways to apply the same principle on a larger scale, so that every freeman and woman can believe that they count, that their voice matters, and that the opportunity for civic contribution and civic virtue lies always before them.

On a brisk March day in 1967, my neighbors rather suddenly chose me to moderate town meeting.

This struck me as a wholly unlikely event. I had come to the Northeast Kingdom town of Kirby in May of 1963, on foot, with a knapsack, sleeping bag, an axe, and Kephart’s Camping and Woolcraft. I started to build a log cabin on the 206-acre piece of land on Kirby Mountain that I had bought one year before. The price was $2,400. The payment terms were 6-percent interest and three years to pay it off.

With the help of two college pals with time on their hands, we got the cabin up (and barely) livable by August. But since I didn’t have a source of income, I went off to Washington to work for a short-lived Republican magazine, and then as a legislative aide for Vermont Senator Winston Prouty.

Though working 600 miles away, I was eager to be a freeman of my town. In 1965 I drove all the way up from Washington for town meeting – only to find out, to my great embarrassment, that town meetings are held in the morning, not at 7 p.m. When town meeting 1966 rolled around I was there early, listened to the proceedings, but didn’t say anything.

A year later, I was slouched in my seat among 35 other townspeople when to my surprise the town Republican chairman, Grant Emery of North Kirby, nominated me for moderator. The nomination was seconded by Virginia Wood, the town clerk from South Kirby. One minute later I was handed the gavel. I later learned that the longtime moderator, a retired farmer named Theodore Simpson, was ill in the hospital (and soon after, died.) There were factions in town, north and south, and my nominators had agreed that as a newcomer and a neutral (the northernmost resident of South Kirby!) my election would not give rise to any factional backbiting.

Having experienced only one town meeting, I was pretty much at sea. I had been in the student senate in high school and college, so I had some idea of the rules of order. In any case, I managed to get through my first trial without making any noticeable mistakes.

I have no recollection of what was debated that day, but one amusing thing happened that I still chuckle about.

My roots were in small-town southern Illinois, where I had been raised by grandparents after my mother died suddenly and my father went off to war. Southern Illinois shares an accent with Kentucky and the Missouri Ozarks. By 1967 I had been gone some years, but my accent was still noticeable.

Most Kirby residents really didn’t know who I was. I hadn’t grown up in or around the town and had no local schoolmates or relatives. To most, I was “the kid from down country who built the log cabin up on the mountain.” I was, I suppose, suspect for being a college-graduate flatlander with citified values and attitudes, and a curious accent to boot.

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Republicanism and Size (Part 1 of 2 parts)

By Donald W. Livingston

The Second Vermont Republic is not yet a reality, but it is what Plato called “a republic in speech.” For this reason it is important to understand what could be meant in saying that it is a “republic.” This might seem an easy task, for we are quite familiar with the term. But that is the problem. Nearly every state in the world today claims to have a “republican” character. The idiom of “republicanism” cuts across ideological lines of left and right. Some say a democracy cannot be a republic. Yet, some states describe themselves as democratic republics, or even as democratic socialist republics, or as liberal democratic republics. There are communist republics, constitutional republics, people’s republics, and republics ruled by dictators. The French Republic produced the first totalitarian regime – complete with a reign of terror – and was later ruled by an emperor, Napoleon. The United States claims to be a republic, but so did the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Benjamin Franklin, when asked what kind of government came out of the Philadelphia Convention in 1787, was supposed to have answered: “A republic, if you can keep it.”

To enter the forum of “republican” speech is to enter the Tower of Babel. But one thing is clear. Whatever a republic is, it must be a very good thing since most everyone wants to identify with it. What is the source of these morally favorable connotations?

The term itself is derived from two Latin terms res and publicus, meaning “the public things.” So the first image we confront is that of the Roman republic. But that polity was modeled on the much older Greek polis, usually translated as city-state. Plato’s great work on this sort of political association is translated as The Republic. Our primordial understanding of a republic is rooted in reflections on the adventures of the Greek city-states and the Roman republic. This includes both an understanding of what was good about these polities and also why they failed. The lessons gathered establish some of the most important postulates of western political philosophy. This classical pagan republican tradition was developed throughout the civilization of Christendom reaching its high point from the 12th to the 16th centuries with the Italian city states and the free cities of Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, and elsewhere.

The following are essential features of republicanism. (1) Sovereignty resides in the people or their representatives; (2) all citizens are equal before the law (which is not to say that the laws should be the same for all); (3) although there can be inequalities of wealth, all citizens should have a measure of economic independence; otherwise factions, demagogues, and tyranny will result; (4) republics are morally intrusive; that is, they enjoy a distinctive way of life binding together generations; and this way of life is rooted in a law not made by the legislature, but is rooted in nature or sacred tradition. Governments can only legislate in accord with law; they do not make law; (5) republics must be small.

In the cacophony of talk about republics, lip service at least is paid to all of the above conditions except (5). Size is not thought to be an essential feature of republicanism. Size, it is said, is a mere quantitative notion, not a moral one. But this is a great mistake. Size is essential. Without it, the virtues of republics – what gives the term its favorable connotations – vanish.

To appreciate this, we must look more carefully at the requirement of size. The proper size of a republic, or of anything else, is determined by its function. The size must be in scale with the function. And the scale for all human things is the human being and its physical and mental capacities. The relative size of a bed has not changed over the millennia because its function has not changed. A committee of 400 is too large for the function of a committee. A cottage is not a small mansion, and a mansion is not a large cottage. Everywhere in the human world the goodness of a thing is inseparable from the question of its function and, consequently, of its size and scale. The function of a republic, according to Plato and Aristotle, is to provide a form of social cooperation which makes possible the development of human excellence, namely economic prosperity, security, justice, practice of the arts and sciences, and philosophical institutions that critically explore the idea and conditions of human excellence.

How many people are needed for such an arrangement? Plato suggested around 5,000 citizens (i.e. male heads of households), which, when women, children, slaves, and foreigners are added, would yield a republic of around 40,000 – something one could walk across in a single day, or as Aristotle said, something one could take in at a single view. Robert Dahl, a longtime student of democratic institutions, has judged that a population of between 50,000 and 200,000 is all that is necessary to create a political order allowing humans to flourish to a high degree. This judgment is amply confirmed by experience, for the great republics of history – Athens, republican Rome, the medieval republics and communes, Renaissance Florence and Venice, the German free cities, and many others – fall within, or are below, the range of 50,000-200,000. (For two excellent studies of why size matters, see Leopold Kohr’s The Breakdown of Nations and Kirkpatrick Sale’s Human Scale.)

Modern writers on republicanism such as Montesquieu and Rousseau agreed that republics had to be small. So small is Rousseau’s republic in The Social Contract that he does not even permit representatives but requires that the sovereign people themselves regularly meet to vote on constitutional matters and to evaluate the performance of government. Rousseau’s republic is modeled on his beloved Geneva, which had, at that time, a population of around 25,000.

The republican tradition is loud and clear in its proclamation that republican order, properly understood, must be of a human scale, which we have taken to be, more or less, in the range of between 50,000 and 200,000. And the tradition also teaches that if a regime grew to great size, it would necessarily lose its self-governing republican character and become a centralized monarchy, no matter what it called itself. The classical case was the Roman republic which, because of its great size – achieved through conquest – had collapsed and become a centralized empire. Yet the legitimating language of republicanism remained throughout. Up to the end, laws were enacted under the seal S.P.Q.R. (the Senate and the People of Rome), but republican liberty had vanished.

The point here is that monarchy is not merely an abstract form of government; it is a centralization of power that occurs spontaneously and necessarily whenever a republic grows beyond its proper size.

It is for this reason that the 18th-Century Scottish philosopher David Hume insisted that republics contain a law in their constitutions against conquests. They cannot both expand their territories and still be republics. And conversely,
Hume also observed that a small kingdom tends either to become a republic or to develop republican characteristics merely because of its size. So size is not a morally irrelevant criterion of republicanism; it is essential. The being of a republic is its being small. After the secession of the colonies from Britain, Americans faced a deep and unprecedented conceptual problem. They understood the republican tradition and were determined to extend it to the new world, but they had inherited territory of such a size as to require centralized monarchy. We should be clear what the colonists meant by monarchy. They did not mean merely a hereditary executive; they meant a large, centralized unitary state (such as Britain was becoming) ruling directly over individuals. The form the central government took was irrelevant.

In this sense, there were a few monarchists in America. They admired the centralized British state and wanted to develop an American version of it. At the Philadelphia Convention in 1787, Alexander Hamilton proposed a unitary state with an executive for life who could appoint state governors and veto state laws. His proposal, however, did not even receive a second. Instead, Americans agreed on a federation of sovereign states that delegated enumerated powers to the central government as their agent, reserving the vast domain of unenumerated powers to themselves. They enshrined this in Article IV, Section IV, which guarantees to each state a republican form of government.

So republicanism in America was to be a feature of the states and not a feature of the federation. “Federation” comes from the Latin foedus, meaning a compact or treaty between previously governing bodies. A federal union of republics is not itself a republic because it cannot satisfy the five conditions mentioned above—notably the condition of size.

Or to put it another way, if the federation were a republic, the political societies within in it would cease to be self-governing republics and would collapse into mere administrative units of the mega-republic—and this would be merely monarchy under another name. In the Virginia Resolutions (1798), James Madison used the term “monarchy” in just this way when he accused the Federalist Party of trying “to consolidate the states by degrees, into one sovereignty ... which would be, to transform the present republican system of the United States, into an absolute, or at best a mixed monarchy.”

As we prepare for Vermont’s next Town Meetings, let us remember that governing in a democracy should be about more than charting a course based on a vote every year or two. It ought to involve ongoing dialogue with constituents. Democratic government must provide a broad spectrum of opportunities for citizens to voice their concerns and to shoulder responsibility in meeting the challenges ahead. Indeed, true democracy ought to be about turning the work of the community over to the community.

True democracy will arrive when Vermonters commit to becoming more than simply taxpayers or clients of government, but true citizens, participants in the process of governance. True democracy will arrive when our governor, Legislature, and the state’s elected officials of all political stripes understand that not all wisdom resides under the golden dome in Montpelier.

True democracy will arrive when Vermont’s cities and towns are treated not as “creatures of the State,” but as partners of State government.

True democracy will arrive when Vermont citizens are relieved of their heavy property tax burden and allowed to decide how they want to tax themselves. True democracy will arrive when we remove the corruptive influence of money from politics and open the door for all to run for political office.

True democracy will arrive when there is a balance of authority and responsibility, and state government is held accountable for the taxes it levies.

True democracy will arrive when we deliver affordable healthcare to every Vermonter and give each citizen a voice in charting a course for our long-term future.

Yes, there is some appeal to returning Vermont to its status as an independent republic. But let us not wait for that day. Let us commit now to transforming the relationship between state government, Vermont communities, and our citizens.

Independence and true democracy begin at home.
in the government, is the emerging reality. Whether in the workplace, on the playground, or past, the real democracy of communal decisions, best substitute for democracy we could find in the requirement democracy, which promotes variety, nimble, and progressive, and (most importantly) sensitive, thus humane.

But the diffusion of socio-economic life, which increasingly defines the postmodern world, relies on networks, not hierarchy. These networks require democracy, which promotes variety, which stimulates innovation. The result is elastic, nimble, and progressive, and (most importantly) sensitive, thus humane.

As democracy-by-representation proved the best substitute for democracy we could find in the past, the real democracy of communal decisions, in which the workplace, the playground, or in the government, is the emerging reality. We should rejoice in this.

A cradle for the new paradigm

If one were to look for a coherent political setting, a polity (that rare coincidence of nation and state) in which to chronicle the coming of the new paradigm (what I.S. Stavrianos called “the promise” in his The Promise of the Coming Dark Age) one would come to Vermont. Why? Because Vermont “leapfrogged” the urban-industrial period (as John McClaughy and I put it in The Vermont Papers) and landed ahead of America — smack dab on the frontier of the future, our environment intact and clean, our social fabric a patchwork of decentralized, human-scale communities, and most importantly, our governing structures democratic to the hilt.

Today, more than 800 seasons of calloused hands and sweating brows later, the hill farmers of Vermont, supported by an equally hard-working and enterprising infrastructure of merchants, inventors, small-scale builders and manufacturers, craft persons, artists and artisans, have endowed us — those who now steward this fine earth between the long waters of the Connecticut and the deep waters of Champlain — with the most natural habitat for democracy on the planet.

My god. What a glorious heritage. What a daunting responsibility.

Town meeting and secession

Thus it is that the fundamental reason many of us are joining together to discuss and promote the peaceful separation of Vermont from the United States is because of what we already are. We are at the core a real democracy and it is this grassroots democracy that now sustains the best representative democracy in America — featuring one of only two governors that must seek re-election every two years and a legislative body of 180 members representing fewer than 650,000 people. If the United States were made up of 50 “Vermonts,” the American Republic would be alive and well, not sinking into an abyss of disgusting politics, inhumane public policy, and increasingly authoritarian governance.

And we would not be secessionists.

But it is equally true that the Second Vermont Republic will not survive as a republic (a representative democracy) without the strong foundation of real democracy that has sustained it for more than two centuries. The multitude of small communities practicing real democracy are spring houses in the high hills of home, furnishing the citizens that the larger, necessarily representative structures, required by the soon-to-be small republics like Vermont, need to govern themselves.

Looking at our once-magnificent national republic during the last 30 years has been like watching a great and fundamentally good giant of a person slowly dying of thirst. All over America, the hillsides of democracy are drying up. These dwindling springs, as the wisest among us from Thomas Jefferson to John Dewey to Wendell Berry have told us, have been the places that have reared our leaders, trained them in the practice of citizenship, endowed them with common sense and humanity, and prepared them to govern.

As I said in an earlier issue of Vermont Commons, what a tragedy it would be if, while we were focusing our efforts on associating ourselves from America, we let our own democracy here in Vermont wither and die.

I tell you this: Vermont without town meeting might in some ways still be a good place. But it would never be Vermont. And while there are many good places, there is only one Vermont.

Every citizen a legislator

The best news is our town meeting governments survived the 20th Century, the most vicious and terrible century when history has ever been written. In America, we let our own democracy here in Vermont wither and die.

Every citizen a legislator. If they could be with us today, Vermonters of 1830 would come to Vermont. Why? Because Vermont “leapfrogged” the urban-industrial period (as John McClaughy and I put it in The Vermont Papers) and landed ahead of America — smack dab on the frontier of the future, our environment intact and clean, our social fabric a patchwork of decentralized, human-scale communities, and most importantly, our governing structures democratic to the hilt.

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It is a fair bet that on the floor of this local legislature women would equal men. Our visitor from the past (like every other woman 18 years old or older) would now be a legislator. It is impossible to name any legislative system in the United States about which this claim can be made.

In a representative year (in this case 2003) my data shows that in a sample of 44 small towns across Vermont, almost half (48 percent) of the attendance at town meeting was made up of women. In Belvedere, Bridport, Charlotte, Crafton, Lincoln, Victory, Wells, Westford, and Westminster, the majority of the local legislators at town meeting were women. The same could be said of nine of the other 34 towns we studied that year.

In Washington, only 14 percent of the members of Congress that year who fashioned and passed the federal budget and then fashioned and set the tax rate and processes for collecting the money to fund it were women. In Montpelier that same year, barely 30 percent of the people that made Vermont’s laws were women.

In a typical Vermont town legislature nearly half of the legislators are women.

For more than a century, America the nation tried to provide women with equal political power. It organized and protested and marched in the streets. It pleaded and demanded. It ran itself through complex and frustrating and often hopeless loops and matrices of convoluted national laws designed to achieve the parity for women without which it will continue to govern in shame.

It failed.

It tried for a decade to pass an amendment to the U.S. Constitution to at least proclaim it believed in the concept of women’s rights. Again, America, the republic, failed. Even the Vermont in which we now live failed. In 1986, a statewide referendum to place an ERA for women in the Vermont Constitution produced a “No.”

While all this was going on, town meeting quietly and without fanfare — accomplished what the biggest, richest, most powerful government on earth failed to — failed miserably to do. We need to think about this fact and we need to think about it deeply.

We need to think about it with pride and we need to ponder this question.

Why the hell is it that our leaders in Montpelier, decade after decade after decade, continue to take power and authority away from the very places where women rule equally with men (the local legislature and the town meeting) and place it in the hands of a government where they don’t even come close to parity: the state legislature?

How dare they ignore town meeting?

How dare we?

Let us, therefore, as the first (albeit “unofficial”) act of the Second Vermont Republic, agree to make sure that the Second Vermont Republic emerges with the single most important institution of the first Vermont Republic intact — alive, well, and growing in influence.

It is what Jefferson called “the wisest invention ever devised by the wit of man for the perfect exercise of self-government.”

Town Meeting.
That, after a reasonable time from the date of the adoption of this resolution by the State of Vermont, the State of Vermont shall consider secession from these United States to reclaim the status of a fully sovereign nation among the nations of the earth, such as it enjoyed before 1791.

UNLESS the following conditions restoring democratic freedoms in Vermont are, in the meantime, recognized, established, and enforced by the federal government of the United States, namely,

1. That no citizen of Vermont, including members of the Vermont National Guard, shall be employed anywhere for military action by the federal government, except by the exercise by Congress of its constitutional authority in Article 1, Section 8, to declare war, or to use state militias “to execute the Laws of the Union, suppress Insurrections and repel Invasions,” and,

2. That the PATRIOT Act and other federal acts violating habeas corpus, as established in Article 1, Section 9 of the Constitution, be repealed, and,

3. That the Constitution of the United States continue to supersede the Vermont constitution and Vermont state statutes, but that it be amended so that the Vermont constitution and Vermont state laws, and other state constitutions and laws, while recognizing the supremacy of the Constitution, shall supersede federal laws so as automatically to nullify, within any state, any federal acts as may be in conflict with that state’s constitution and laws; and

4. That this proposed amendment may be stated as follows: “State laws not prohibited by the Constitution shall automatically nullify any conflicting federal laws, except for those enforcing powers specifically delegated to the United States by the Constitution.”

Comment:
The federal government has dragged Vermonters into illegal war and wrongly suspended their right of habeas corpus. On these points, the remedy is for the Constitution once more to be respected and enforced.

But the Constitution remains incomplete. It pledges, in Article 4, Section 4, that the “United States shall guarantee to every State in this Union a Republican Form of Government.” It also states, in the 10th Amendment, that “the powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.”

But the federal government has usurped the Republican forms of state governments, made state laws subservient to federal laws, and thereby assumed powers not delegated to it, in violation of the 10th Amendment.

The proposed remedy requires a Constitutional amendment which would give the states the right to nullify federal law, but only within the framework of the federal Constitution. Such federal law as may be found explicitly in the Constitution, e.g., the right to levy income taxes established in the 16th Amendment, or the voting rights established in the 15th and 19th Amendments, could not be nullified under the proposed Amendment by state law. But other federal laws with no explicit basis in the Constitution, such as federal drug, minimum-wage, property, and contract laws, could be nullified by state laws.

A nullification amendment would place an important check on federal power while restoring the autonomy of state governments.

Those who support federal statutes on anything from abortion to environmental protection to education might be loath to leave these issues to the states. Such issues could be brought back to the federal level, however, through the process of Constitutional amendment.

On the other hand, nullification would end the tyranny of federal government and genuinely devolve power to the states, while providing for greater diversity and increased accountability. A nullification amendment would allow states once more to be free Republics managing their own affairs.

The federal government suffers from a corrupt electoral process, with special interests and lobbyists dominating legislation for private ends. A Nullification Amendment would be an important step towards reforming the federal government, and making it more democratically accountable.

Failure to achieve such reform may well lead to secession.

ADRIAN KUZMINSKI
Fly Creek, NY

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**TAKE IT EASY**
*(Harry Morgan Joins The Second Vermont Republic – Spring 2006)*

**By Peter Bukatski**

I told you to take it easy. I won’t tell it to you again. Brother, don’t tell me your troubles. I don’t want to hear it. I don’t want to think about it. Just take it easy. All right? Stop putting your mouth all over everything.

This guy I knew lived in a box all winter. His advocate went down to the islands in the stream. The advocate went eighty-four days without taking a fish. And this guy’s still got his box. Some box. Some advocate.

Everybody wants to be a big shot. I lost my boat off Cuba because of taking on bright boys like Ollie North, Gary Hart and John Kerry. They didn’t know how to fish either. As fishermen they were fatal.

Now I’m up in Montpelier, Vermont, waiting for a lawyer I call Mr. Beelips to set me up with a boat on Lake Memphremagog. He says he’s a progressive and believes in sustainability. Brother. I leave messages on his machine. Everybody wants to be a big shot. I lost my boat off Cuba because of taking on bright boys like Ollie North, Gary Hart and John Kerry. They didn’t know how to fish either. As fishermen they were fatal.

I leave messages on his machine. Every spook in the world has a machine so they don’t have to answer.

Everybody wants to be a big shot. I lost my boat off Cuba because of taking on bright boys like Ollie North, Gary Hart and John Kerry. They didn’t know how to fish either. As fishermen they were fatal.

If you want to go after the really big fish, ask for Harry. I’ve lost bigger fish than you’ll ever read about in some book. But don’t try to tell me your troubles. It makes the fishing tragic. I’ll have to dump you in the swamp. Over you go, brother. Just like that.

People ruin everything if you give them a chance. This bright boy we’ve got for a President is letting the big shots buy up the green hills of Vermont. Pretty soon now brother, you won’t be able to take a fish here unless you’re some rich goofy spook that lives in another country. Brother, that’s some President.

Beelips says his bunch talks about a social revolution for the working class. But it’s just more talk. They go and pass laws against smoking instead of raising wages and then they want to tax our junk food. That’s the working class they’re killing there. They never think of that. Some revolution. The hell with their revolution.

I guess I’ll join up with the people who want Vermont to secede. I guess maybe that would be all right. They’re instead of a working man with a good boat and a Thompson gun to run stuff across the big lakes. Stuff that can’t talk.

That’s all I’ve got to say. Brother, I really put my mouth on it. Talked it all away. It’ll be all right once the sharks get their fill, but not in our time, brother. You’ll see me on the water. Unless I see you first. Brother, this is some poem. Take it easy.

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**Statewide Secession Resolution Ahead For 2007 Town Meetings?**

Anyone who doubts former House Speaker Tip O’Neill’s assertion that “all politics is local” hasn’t been to a Vermont town meeting. Here, on the first Tuesday in March, the most global of issues are subject to often-intense debate in the most local of settings, provided that Vermont citizens can muster the signatures of 5 percent of the town voter checklist to put a resolution on the ballot.

Cumulatively, these town votes can register an impact by reflecting widespread sentiment throughout the state. The most famous example emanated from the nuclear-freeze movement when, in 1982, 161 Vermont towns endorsed a call for the U.S. to halt production of nuclear weapons and for those towns to declare themselves nuclear-free zones.

Last year, a resolution calling upon the state legislature to examine the constitutionality and legality of Vermont National Guard deployments overseas, and ultimately to withdraw U.S. troops from Iraq, made it onto the ballots of 60 Vermont towns (more than a fifth of the state’s organized municipalities), and won approval in close to 50 of them.

No such unified statewide resolution is in the offing this year. But will next year be the year that Vermont voters, town by town, consider peaceable secession from the U.S. empire? We’ve got one year to work on it, and every day seems to bring new arguments in favor of leaving the Empire’s sinking ship and creating our own second Vermont Republic. •
Re-Inventing Vermont: Towards 21st Century Blueprints


Now, close to two decades later, as citizens of the United States empire confront global peak-oil realities, stupendous corporate corruption, titanic military expenditures, massive electoral fraud, runaway federal spending, and a “war on terror” that Mr. Cheney promises “will not end in our lifetimes,” we need to re-visit Vermont-focused books like this one.

As Chelsea Green Press now brings The Vermont Papers back into print, Vermont Commons has reprinted a section from the book’s opening pages, setting our 21st-century stage with uncanny prophetic vision.

To order a copy of the book, visit www.chelseagreen.com. Vermont Commons readers can take 30 percent off the cover price through May 2006.

Chapter 1: Viewing the Pasture Spring

You cannot run away from a weakness
You must some time fight it out or perish
And if that be so, why not now?
And where do you stand?

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

For all its inspiring success, the American Dream still lies beyond our reach. America stands as a beacon to liberty, democracy, and community. But that tradition is under challenge from the forces of centralized power. These forces have never wholly succeeded, but neither have they been decisively repelled. That task still lies ahead. The little green-clad state of Vermont may well become the place to show America how liberty, democracy, and equality can be restored.

We live on dirt roads in the back country of northern New England. As this book goes to print, the shadows of November’s sun lie flat on the face of the land. Birds gather against the sky, and the orange needles of the tamaracks fall silently onto the forest floor. None of this has changed in two hundred years. Vermonters have treated this land with relative care. True, like others, we have slashed and hacked and gouged and spilled and spewed. Yet here the planet still breathes as it spins through the galaxy. So far at least Mother Earth has pardoned our sins. So far she has repaired herself.

You sense that watching a chickadee sass the has pardoned our sins. So far she has repaired her -

You cannot run away from a weakness
You must some time fight it out or perish
And if that be so, why not now?
And where do you stand?

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

Their language is the language of horse races or sports commentators awaiting the next play. The news media have become enamored of campaign tactics and bored with substance. They hype the process month after month, insulting the people with their inflated speculations, usually couched in terms of intrigue and deceit – anything to keep the viewer’s fingers off the remote-control button.

Back at the grassroots the people have barricaded themselves in interest groups as insurance against defeat in the one or two areas where government action is most important to them. Political parties, once healthy, decentralized, and citizen-based, have become too weak to provide coherence and direction. Congress stumbles along, deferring decisions right and left to the courts and the bureaucracy. The president faces incessant attack by the electronic media, which are most interested in scoring points than in informing the public on key matters of governance. Washington seems more and more remote and irrelevant. The danger is that it is remote but not irrelevant.

National political leaders seem to have a sense that something is amiss, but they lack the understanding to identify the solution or do anything about it if they could identify it. For the solution must push up from below, like wild violets through the dark earth in springtime.

Historian Barry D. Karl puts our condition in brilliant perspective. Centralism may have been necessary at a point in our history, he concedes, but now it has “severed our contacts with the more familiar state and local governments” and has “threatened our sense of ourselves as citizens.” No one has better expressed the politics in the post-modern period: “At a moment in history when the technology of communication is improving by quantum leaps, our suspicions of the truth of what we are told and what we know are greater than they have ever been. These suspicions have their source in our oldest and most profound need: our need to govern ourselves.”

The collapse of the American center is a manifestation of a vanishing democracy in the heartland. Jefferson, as Hannah Arendt pointed out, had a “foreboding of how dangerous it might be to allow a people a share in public power without providing them at the same time more public space than the ballot box and more opportunity to make their own voice heard in public than election day.” Jefferson’s fears were justified. As the watersheds of community democracy are sucked dry, the rivers of citizenship that fed our great national institutions grow even more shallow, and the American public is withering away.

In short, the republic cannot survive without representative bodies that are credible and competent. Representation is built on citizenship. But citizens cannot be factory-built or found in electronic villages. They must be raised at home. That rearing takes place in real polities: places where community and politics meet, where individuals learn the habit of democracy face to face, where decision making takes place in the context of community interdependence.

This then is the great challenge of the twenty-first century: saving the center by shoring up its parts, preserving union by emphasizing disunion, making cosmopolitanism possible by making parochialism necessary, restoring the representative republic by rebuilding direct democracy, strengthening the national character through a rebirth of local citizenship.

Over the last quarter century there have been many recommendations to save American politics, but they have been cosmetic and superficial, like giving smelling salts to a fighter whose legs have gone. We propose to return to where the roots of democracy are still firmly established and nourish them to new life. We propose to focus on a place where citizenship still lives, where a small pastureland of liberty and community of the kind America so desperately needs still lies intact. There we propose to build a new resurgent twenty-first century politics of human scale. At that promising place which will inspire all America, we suggest Vermont. •
CALL FOR REPRESENTATIVES

TO THE FIRST NORTH AMERICAN SECESIONIST CONVENTION

The Middlebury Institute hereewith issues a call for representatives of active organizations and groups in North America concerned with secession and separatism to attend a convention in Burlington, Vermont, this coming November.

We are seeking to provide a forum where people with a serious interest in secession from the United States, Canada, and Mexico can present information on what each organization is doing, learn the policies and tactics of other organizations, trade ideas on organizing, strategizing, and politicking, assess the strength of the secession movement, and figure out ways to make it stronger and more successful.

It is understood from the beginning that there are many varied groups with secession as the core of their strategy, and it is unlikely that there will be any full consensus on platforms or goals. But if we can assemble articulate and active representatives from serious, ongoing groups that are working in their various ways to push the idea of secession at a regional, state, or multi-state level, we are convinced that we can advance the cause of secession throughout the continent and pave the way for some genuine successes.

The Middlebury Institute is willing to underwrite the travel costs for some of those representatives, especially from the Western reaches of the continent, who are unable to pay their own way. We are unable to absorb the two-night hotel room fees, but we will provide a conference room for a Saturday meeting and a banquet on Saturday night.

Individuals from real, active, serious, and ongoing secessionist and separatist organizations—please, no individual secessionists or the like—are urged to contact the Director@MiddleburyInstitute.net if they wish to take part in the first North American Secessionist Convention.

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Media Education for Reform, Justice and Democracy

ACME 3rd Continental Summit:
October 6 - 8, 2006
Burlington, Vermont

The Action Coalition for Media Education will gather world-renowned experts, reformers, health advocates, educators, activists and media makers at gorgeous Champlain College in Burlington for its 3rd Continental Summit.

SAVE THE DATE and join the excitement!

FREE multimedia resource packages for the first 300 Early Bird Summit registrants!

Keynote and plenary speakers include:

Wally Bacon, Internet citizen activist and NAMM founder; Doug Gentile, media effects researcher and author of Big Media.

Amy Goodman, journalist and host of Pacifica Radio’s Democracy Now.

Lieutenant Colonel David Grossman, internationally famous expert on violence and former West Point psychology professor.

Sal Bandy, author of Killing Us Softly and Can’t Buy My Love.

Bob McCannon, long-time popular speaker, NMMIP founding executive director, and ACME co-founder.

Robert McChesney, media studies scholar and author of nine books, including The Problem of the Media and Evils of the Media.

Bill McKibben, popular speaker and author of The Age of Unreason and Why Americans Can’t Be Free.

Peter Phillips, Project Censored acclaimed founder and executive director.

Anthony Riddle, Director for Community Media Education director. One of the few independent Congressman and U.S. Senate candidates.

Bernard Sanders, Indy media leader.

Hannah Sassman and Pete Trudel, Prometheus Radio Project.

Josh Silver, a leading media reformer and Free Press executive director.

John Stauber, Center for Media and Democracy co-founder and author of many popular books and videos about the stealth industry.

Diane Wilson, environmental activist and winner of the Right Livelihood award.

Robert Jensen, University of Texas journalism professor and former editor of the Austin Chronicle.

Steve McFadden, University of Texas journalism professor and current editor of the Austin Chronicle.

John Leventhal, University of Texas journalism professor.

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Looking for Real Democracy? Look Around

In January, 2006, Kirkpatrick Sale was in Vermont to discuss his book, "Real Democracy, Look Around," which has the highest, an average of only 26 percent of those eligible actually comes to vote. That suggests some real weakness in the system, and yet it reflects another aspect of democracy: you don’t have to go vote unless you want to. Of course, in an effective democracy high attendance is not only more representative but more efficient: since more varied ideas and approaches are aired.

But choosing not to attend is a form of voting, too. You might call it pre-voting abstinence.

And one reason that attendance is sometimes low is that the matters to be discussed are just not relevant to many people, or they decide they aren’t, or there is no strong impetus to change things that have been settled by other folks for a long time. In Vermont in particular, a great many matters of importance are settled on a state level, which is why there is such a good turnout for most state elections, and why they happen every two years – and why there are more state legislators per capita in Vermont than any other state save New Hampshire. Since there are no real county or district governments, matters of almost any size that extend beyond town borders have to be dealt with by the state legislature.

Nevertheless, the town meetings represent real democracy, with all its shortcomings, and have proved to be an effective way of conducting town business for more than 200 years. As in times of yore, they continue to operate because they work, which is the finest proof that the voice of the people, expressed in a direct face-to-face meeting, is the best form of government the world has yet come up with.

In fact, so good not only in its achievement but in its image, lying in the minds of all Americans at some not-necessarily verbal level, that “town meeting” is now used in all kinds of ways that have nothing to do with governance at all. Starting some time in the Carter era, I think, politicians began to assemble ordinary folk in an assembly hall, let them ask questions, and call it a “town meeting.” And now it’s gotten so that any group of ordinary folks brought together for a discussion, be it of AIDS, or a new product, or qualities desired in a university president, gets called a “town meeting.”

Such perversion of language, typical of a mass society that needs to twist words to disguise its true nature, is at least a sign of one thing. The fundamental idea of rule by the people, and at a modest scale, is so fundamental to the human soul, perhaps by now even coded in our genes, that it can probably never be eradicated.

As the New England town meeting still reminds us.

It is usually claimed that the United States is a democracy, but you only have to think about it for a minute to realize that a term that means “rule by the people” has to be mightily and torturously stretched to apply to a system in which the people make none of the consequential decisions of the nation.

We are allowed to vote every so often among an array of candidates we seldom know to select one that will make thousands of decisions in our name for the next two or six years. They do not know, and do not pretend to know, what we think before they make those decisions—and, after all, the members of the House of Representatives actually “represent” an average of 643,000 people in their individual home districts and could not possibly find out even if they wanted to.

And even when they make their decisions for us, they have almost no way of knowing how those will turn out after being handed to an Executive of a whole bunch of other people, many of whom have political agendas of their own and most of whom are hirelings in the civil service with still other interests and priorities.

Far from being “rule by the people,” this system provides rule by 335 people who theoretically make the laws and 290 million people who abide by them, or don’t. Except that “rule” doesn’t actually make any sense in such a context, since such a crowd of people is capable of attending to only a tiny part of the actions that ultimately affect the way things are run.

But that’s not the way it has been through history—or prehistory. For most of the time since we became Homo sapiens, decisions were made by tribal systems, where, as near as we can tell, most of the individuals actually had a say in what went on because that was, evolutionarily, the most efficient way to survive. Even when empires and suchlike arose in the Neolithic, the great majority of people continued to arrange affairs on a local level with considerable democracy at work—again, not because they knew anything about political science but because that was the efficient way to build the roads, collect the harvest, allocate the spoils.

You have only to look closely at how towns actually took the principal decisions of their lives most places on earth to see that, for many centuries, some form or other of the town meeting generally operated—and more than once a year, to be sure—regardless of whether or not kind of higher political body existed. The ancient Greek city-states all had some kind of democratic rule—that’s where the word comes from, after all—when they were left alone and people like Alexander didn’t mess with their power. In Barbary during the 17th and 18th centuries there were various beys and whatnots nominally in power, but the decisions of life were made by local djennas (in effect, town meetings). In 19th-century Russia, where matters of foreign policy and military operations were decided by the tsars and their corrupt and cruel couriers, the matters of daily life, government on the local level, was in the hands of the mirs—not exactly democratic bodies to be sure, but with widespread input and consensual decisions.

And so on: democracy operated at a local level because decisions had to be made, and it worked. The story of the modern nation-state is the story of the effective destruction of town-level democracy—democracy in the sense that all of the people (or in some cases all of the men) of a place made the central decisions—almost everywhere in the world. Of course, towns and cities are allowed to make a variety of local decisions and are empowered to carry out the laws and regulations made at higher levels, but all the really important matters, particularly having to do with economics, banking, trade, and currency, are made at the national level, even in states that trumpet their allegiance to “democracy.”

The exceptions are to be found in just two places—Switzerland and the United States. In Switzerland, some important decisions are still made at the level of about 3,000 communes that average about 4,000 people each, and in two places, Apenzell Innerrhoden (population 5,587) and Glarus (38,000), there are annual meetings of the entire population (Landsgemeinde) over the age of 18 to decide major matters. In addition to which, to assure direct democracy as much as it can be in a nation of seven million people, Switzerland has regular referendums, recalls, and initiatives, at both cantonal and national levels, by which people (since 1993 both women and men) can and do influence significant policies—as is clear from the fact that more than half the provisions of the Swiss constitution were the result of referendums or ballot initiatives.

In the United States, as near as I can tell, there are meaningful town meetings only in the six states of New England and in four anomalous towns in Minnesota originally settled by migrants from New England. As is clear from Frank Bryan’s masterful Real Democracy, an analysis of “the New England Town Meeting and How It Works” (Chicago, 2004), this is an institution that still has some significance and in a general sense is an effective expression of the people’s will—or at least as much as any institution can be in a huge and populous nation like this.

Not that town meetings are a perfect panacea. To be effective, they can operate only on a small scale—as Bryan shows, a quarter of the meetings are held in towns with fewer than 1,000 residents, 7 percent in towns under 200, and only 2 percent with more than 5,000. What’s more, he shows that as the size of the town increases, the meetings become less democratic, in the sense that a smaller percentage of the town participates and fewer people speak. Attendance varies not only by town size, but also by state—in Connecticut, an average of only 9 percent of the eligible population turns out. Even in Vermont, which has the highest, an average of only 26 percent of those eligible actually comes to vote.

That suggests some real weakness in the system, and yet it reflects another aspect of democracy: you don’t have to go vote unless you want to. Of course, in an effective democracy high attendance is not only more representative but more efficient: since more varied ideas and approaches are aired.

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And one reason that attendance is sometimes low is that the matters to be discussed are just not relevant to many people, or they decide they aren’t, or there is no strong impetus to change things that have been settled by other folks for a long time. In Vermont in particular, a great many matters of importance are settled on a state level, which is why there is such a good turnout for most state elections, and why they happen every two years—and why there are more state legislators per capita in Vermont than any other state save New Hampshire. Since there are no real county or district governments, matters of almost any size that extend beyond town borders have to be dealt with by the state legislature.

Nonetheless, the town meetings represent real democracy, with all its shortcomings, and have proved to be an effective way of conducting town business for more than 200 years. As in times of yore, they continue to operate because they work, which is the finest proof that the voice of the people, expressed in a direct face-to-face meeting, is the best form of government the world has yet come up with.

In fact, so good not only in its achievement but in its image, lying in the minds of all Americans at some not-necessarily verbal level, that “town meeting” is now used in all kinds of ways that have nothing to do with governance at all. Starting some time in the Carter era, I think, politicians began to assemble ordinary folk in an assembly hall, let them ask questions, and call it a “town meeting,” though the people there were not going to propose any laws or vote on any resolutions. Bush would have hand-picked Republicans with hand-picked softball questions assembled every so often on his campaign trail, and call this perversion of democracy a “town meeting.” And now it’s gotten so that any group of ordinary folks brought together for a discussion, be it of AIDS, or a new product, or qualities desired in a university president, gets called a “town meeting.”

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