

Interview Richard Watts & Frank Bryan
July 17, 2013 Big Hollow Road, Starksboro
W= Richard Watts
B = Frank Bryan

INTERVIEW

B: I am Frank Bryan I am a former professor of political science at University of Vermont and now emeritus and continuing my work at my own leisure at Starksboro.

W: Frank let's start with talking about Vermont research and why it's important. What is about Vermont that makes it a good laboratory to study democracy?

B: Well it's an outlier. If you're going to study democracy you have to study in my view in small communities. One of the great problems of studying democracy is we call the United States of America a democracy and we call Huntington Vermont a democracy. Well they don't tell you anything about the politics of America or the politics of Huntington to use the word in both venues do they? I mean so democracy, traditional, real democracy as I call it – the extension of what the Greeks were thinking about has to take place in small places and even the Greeks, I mean when we think of a town meeting in Vermont we think about the Greek assembly, but the Greek assembly had up to five thousand people there, it was a huge crowd. The real democracy that would be analogous of Vermont that at –even with the Greeks in the beginning that's why Vermont is perfect. Think about it 24 – 6 cities and towns is just a small slab of real estate forested granite area up there just southeast of Canada. Each one of these towns is historically a coherent unit that did almost everything on their own. They made their decisions face to face. There's no place in the world you could study democracy that would be better, well historically you could've. Now the Swiss cantons are an example but even there there's very little empirical data. If we could go back historically there would be lots of options.

W: And what is it about town meetings that, you've written that we should think about town meeting process that's for the whole country, what is it about the way we get together in a town meeting that makes it so unique individual and special?

B: Well there's lots of controversy about things but in my view the town meeting is a legislative process whereby you actually fashion public policy face to face in a community and that is hugely different from anything else. The state law now, unfortunately, (I 10 (b) 42 takes original and we have to precision **so what town meeting says is that we trust ordinary people so much to govern themselves that we'll let them make the laws rather than having them elect somebody to**

make the laws that govern them; Which is astounding when you think about it, and Vermont is a place where you still can do that.

W: There's something you've written about how when you know your neighbors you can't really I don't know, be hostile in the same way you could be if you didn't know them.

B: Yes. That kind of forced intimacy has its upside and downside and I think its upsides is really much more important than its downside. Lots of times we differ, the downside is that we differ too much to the fact that someone is sitting right there and looking at us, that we won't be as tough as we might be in private and that inhibits a certain kind of honesty and reality in making public policy. The upside is though that it creates civility. You learn over the years to disagree with somebody even in public, and be civil about it. **And why do you have to be civil?**

Because you live with them. When you walk out into the parking lot to your car you may bump into the person that you just disagreed with, you see what I mean? "up close and personal" so you're going to be polite with them on the floor of the house in these cases.

You wouldn't get any of this trash that we see on national television now or national radio where people miles apart electronically separated forever that just bad-mouth people consistently. You don't get that and when you do get it its usually over pretty quickly. First of all the moderators don't allow it but **living in a small town community where you may bump into your neighbor on the street creates overtime a civic attitude that's overall key to democracy. Let me give you an example if I'm driving home from work down Big Hollow Road here and I see someone off the road I'm going to stop and help them. Now is that because I'm a better person? Small town people are no better, we're not all going to heaven we're as bad as anybody else but I will stop and I'll stop because they know that's my truck, they know that I know it's them, and so I don't want to meet them on the street or down at the store or wherever and have them say "Why the hell didn't you stop? You went right by me." So that kind of almost enforced civility creates the habit of civility and forces us to recognize our common humanity in a way that electronic distance never can it never can do that and I think fundamentally that's the problem with the American republic at the center now is that electronic technology has allowed us to really denigrate each other with immunity, in fact you get paid for it.** If you have a right wing show then the left wing gets a show and at certain levels the one is no better than the other.

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crops up and shows itself with that certain kind of tolerance and civility. But even come on, the Scandinavian places are closer to Vermont because they're cold places miserable to live with a lot of small towns and communities.

W: Now sometimes when you bring people from other places to a Vermont town meeting they say it's long and boring.

B Well yes of course with my reputation in studying town meeting I've had people from now all over the world, I recently had a fellow on a Fulbright at Harvard from China come up and we went to two town meetings. He actually wrote a book about it and sent me a copy but of course I can't even read a word of it, I can't even see if he quoted me for god sakes I have to get someone to help me read that book. But when newcomers come to Vermont even professor Mansbridge at the Kennedy school who did a profoundly important study of town meetings which she saw in the town of Shelburne Vermont (Shelby) was put off a little bit by the rules of procedure for one thing and the fact that it was long and boring. They expected you see, given the national perspective to have fierce debates and Daniel Webster shaking his fists and all that but what it really boils down to is ordinary people going through the often mundane process of dotting the "I's" and crossing the "t's" and talking about things that are local, parochial, trucks and stuff like that. And of course in the last hell, 25, 30 40 years ever since the nuclear freeze movement in the eighties nationally Vermont town meetings are known for their proclamations to the nation about what the nation ought to be doing. And so people outside the town meeting country in northern New England got to think that's what we talk about. That's not what we talk about. And the reason people listen, I mean Jim Leher from National Public Television actually claimed that if it hadn't been for the Vermont town meetings that the whole nuclear freeze movement might not have begun. I mean he credited it all to Vermont. But where does town meeting get that reputation? Why would anybody listen to a Vermont town meeting? And why are town meetings so appreciated? Because people think or did think we solve our local issues locally and face to face. **It's the fact that we can get along enough to govern ourselves that the nation pays attention to us when we give them advice about governing the nation. That's what gave and gives the Vermont town meeting its credibility.** We're no more credible than anyone else in our opinions of national issues. When it comes out of a town meeting its got that wonderful ethic about it that these people took the time away from their local concerns where everyone's equal and everyone has a say to tell us how to govern ourselves and we'd better pay attention to that.

W: I know you've written that the way politicians have adopted town meetings – so we have Obama and George Bush doing town meetings. Do you have any thoughts on that?

B : Well again I think this notion of town meeting as a public forum rather than a legislative decision making body is an unfortunate development that has occurred in the last half century and certainly in the last 20 to 30 years so that – just to pick on Bernie Sanders (I really put off all of my conservative friends when I endorsed him when he first ran for governor I mean I'll never forget that I mean I love Bernie. Why? Because he was mayor of Burlington he was fighting for the rights of Burlingtonians over the state. He was a localist. I still get emails from the Sanders people saying that Bernie is coming from Vermont to hold a town meeting and he can't do that.

W Right, right.

B It's illegal. By the way so many politicians do it I shouldn't pick on Bernie. But I wish he'd change it and I wish the others would too. I think the Leahy office did but I'm not sure. I don't hear from them as much as I do with Bernie but it really wrangles me every time I hear that because it's not a town meeting, it's using town meeting in vein. And it diminishes town meeting and it says indirectly that (and I know Sanders doesn't believe this) o hell I can use this name and it would be like me saying I'm a farmer because I use oxen in the woods sometimes these people say o well I have this farm. No you don't you have a garden. I'm not a farmer. Language is language words mean things and if we can't name things Arthur Bentley – a great American philosopher wrote a book called “knowing in the known” and he said that science begins with naming things and if you don't have discrete names what the hell good is it? So that by a public hearing by a senator of Vermont is a town meeting, what are we doing in Starksboro? What are you going to call that? I call it real democracy... but that began when Jimmy Carter

government be telling us in Starksboro what we can feed our kids at hot lunch? Twenty years ago there was a big brew-ha-ha about that, that even the food we serve to our children in school had to be cleared by some federal agency. I'm sounding like a crazy right-winger but I don't

