

—Slug:.....COMM-0851.opin.view.rtm_seymour
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—For section.....Voices/Viewpoint
—Format.....LETTERS - Opinions - Letters to the Editor
—Dateline.....Brattleboro
—Article Number:.....43028



Notes from editor (not for publication):

I love your writing, Gemma. Thanks so much.

I don't have capacity to do footnotes properly in our workflow, and that's not really a thing with newspapers. I integrated the sources as attribution, I hope gracefully.

—Jeff



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 'Lamb will be on the menu'

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

2 All societies above a certain size and scope are better
3 governed by representation. The voters of Brattleboro understood
4 this in the 1960s, when they made the change to Representative
5 Town Meeting. Are we more wise than they?

####END SUBHED####

6 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

7 IT'S BEEN SAID THAT "people get the government they
8 deserve" (Joseph de Maistre, French writer, diplomat, and
9 lawyer).

10 "Democracy," it has also been said, "is two wolves and
11 a lamb voting on what's for dinner" (Shelby Foote, historian). You
12 can be sure that lamb will be on the menu.

13 Still again, it has been said that "the strain of anti-
14 intellectualism has been a constant thread winding its way
15 through our political and cultural life, nurtured by the false
16 notion that democracy means that 'my ignorance is just as good
17 as your knowledge'" (Isaac Asimov, writer and scholar).

18 The founders of our state and our nation, and the framers
19 and ratifiers of their constitutions, understood very well that to be
20 governed by democracy alone would be to invite government by
21 our worst impulses. This has become more clear than ever in the
22 present moment, dominated as we have been by the divide-and-
23 conquer ethos of neoliberalism for the past half century.

24 We get the government we deserve, because we get
25 precisely the government that results from the level of care we
26 choose to take in our duty of voting, the level of care we choose
27 to take in our duty to ourselves and to our fellows to inform and
28 educate ourselves, and the level of care and consideration we
29 choose to exhibit toward each other and to Nature.

30 In this critical moment, when we desperately need a
31 politics of care and consideration to prevail over a politics of
32 division and conquest, it seems to some that surely a government
33 in which all vote must be superior to a government in which only
34 a select few vote, particularly on such a small scale as a Vermont
35 town.

36 To that end, a petition has been made to the Brattleboro
37 Selectboard to place a referendum on the ballot that would
38 rescind the representative form of town meeting that has
39 prevailed in Brattleboro for the past 65 years.

40 For all public questions, proponents would replace
41 Representative Town Meeting with a townwide secret ballot,

42 archaically called an “Australian ballot,” despite that procedure
43 having been an established norm in elections in the United States
44 for well over a century.

45 I oppose these measures — not only because I am an
46 elected member of that body, but also because I study history, I
47 study politics, and it is my considered opinion that rescinding
48 Representative Town Meeting would be detrimental to our town.
49 Rather than empowering the people, it would disempower and
50 effectively disenfranchise far too many.

51 * * *

52 IN 1960, when Representative Town Meeting was
53 instituted, the voting age was still 21, not 18, and the
54 demographics of the town were both more conservative and
55 more homogeneous than today.

56 Furthermore, most of those voting in 1960 had in their
57 adult minds the experience of World War II, which had ended
58 just 15 years prior, an experience which I think we can all
59 probably agree brought the country closer together and
60 demonstrated the value of our political norms.

61 A soldier who entered the war at age 18 in 1942 would
62 have been 36 years old in 1960, in the prime of their adult
63 understanding of the world and of politics. The youngest 21-year-
64 old voter in 1960 would now be 87.

65 Very few people in our town who participate in public
66 and civic life in 2026 have the standing to claim accurate
67 memories of why Brattleboro voted 1,293–749 in favor of
68 Representative Town Meeting in 1960, or why and how the town
69 sustained challenges to it in both 1964 and 1968, long before
70 demographic shift began to change Vermont from a Republican
71 Party bastion to a Democratic Party bastion.

72 Our population is, at least in numbers, has not
73 significantly changed, but the number of households — and their
74 diversity — has dramatically increased.

75 * * *

76 IF MERELY INCREASING the number of votes cast would
77 improve our government, why stop at Town Meeting? Why not
78 abolish the Selectboard as well, the Vermont Legislature and
79 governor, even the United States Congress and the president?
80 Why have courts, even, if the will of the people is so obviously
81 superior?

82 Are we to believe that our more conservative forebears
83 were somehow attempting to subvert the will of the people, by
84 calling for a representative form of Town Meeting to replace the
85 traditional direct democracy of an open Town Meeting?

86 We now live in a society that has been designed to strip
87 from us any measure of care and consideration we might wish for
88 ourselves, our loved ones, and our communities. The
89 manipulation algorithms of social media, designed to harvest our
90 outrage for profits, to inflame the sentiments of the public, have
91 replaced any pretense of responsible journalism in too many of
92 our institutions and have become the de facto public square,
93 filled with people endlessly ridiculing, haranguing, and harassing
94 their perceived opponents.

95 To make law and policy by common consent is to reduce
96 government to something below the average of human
97 intelligence, knowledge, wisdom, and compassion, for
98 mathematically speaking, a majority must prevail, and a majority
99 is more than half.

100 Rather than being ruled by the better angels of our
101 natures, as Abraham Lincoln urged, we would instead be drawn
102 backsliding into philosopher Thomas Hobbes' *bellum omnium*
103 *contra omnes* — the “war of all against all.”

104 * * *

105 ALL SOCIETIES above a certain size and scope are better
106 governed by representation.

107 Government by representatives, at least theoretically,
108 allows each constituency to choose from among its members the
109 most qualified, the most intelligent, the most knowledgeable, the
110 most wise, the most thoughtful and considerate.

111 It binds those representatives to deliberate in one room at
112 the same time, face-to-face, in the best interests of the people,
113 rather than measure the worth of each and every proposal
114 secretly by the least common denominator.

115 The voters of Brattleboro understood this in 1960, in
116 1964, and in 1968. Are we more wise than they?

117 * * *

118 TO PROVIDE insurance, we govern by written
119 Constitution, by the rule of Law, rather than the whim of Man.
120 Our constitutions are designed to give us assurance that,
121 whatsoever else our representatives may enact, they are barred
122 from abridging our fundamental rights, so that neither they nor
123 the people at large may run roughshod over our freedoms. Our
124 form of government is specifically designed to thwart democracy
125 when it needs thwarting.

126 Government exists to be an abstraction of the trust
127 relationships between neighbors that must be maintained for
128 peaceable coexistence. Above a certain number of people,
129 human consciousness does not permit implicit trust, because that
130 is the number of those with whom we can sustain intimate bonds
131 of neighborly fellowship. Most people cannot maintain implicit
132 trust relationships with more than about 150 people at a time.

133 Governments ideally exist to allow us to get along with
134 less strife in larger communities by making the due process of law
135 impersonal and impartial. Government functions best when it
136 governs closest to its constituents, but beyond the point where it
137 is possible to implicitly trust because of our personal familiarity,
138 government must be sufficiently constrained by law that we
139 need not trust its officials, personally.

140 If that is not the government that results from the voting
141 of our representatives, then who is to blame but we ourselves, for
142 failing to choose from among ourselves those as will best secure
143 good governance — not for the greatest number, but for all?

144 * * *

145 GOVERNMENT — whether by direct democracy or by
146 constitutional, democratic-republican representation — does not
147 self-regulate. It must be continually held accountable and
148 measured, not against the will of the majority, but against the
149 unalienable, natural rights of the individual to Equality, Liberty,
150 and Justice for All.

151 It is obligated to serve the best interests of all, not the
152 desires of those who happen to seize the reins of power in any
153 given era. It must not abandon even a single individual by the
154 wayside to serve any majority, however great.

155 Adding more voters who decline to take interest in civic
156 affairs and who vote with their passions is a recipe for bad
157 government. It would remove power and deliberation from the
158 people's duly elected representatives and concentrate it in the
159 hands of any three-member majority of the Selectboard, who
160 would have inordinate power to determine which measures go to
161 the ballot. It would fundamentally reduce the capacity for checks
162 and balances in our town government.

163 For these reasons, I urge the people of Brattleboro to
164 oppose this ballot measure, and vote to retain Representative
165 Town Meeting. In a world that has forgotten how to evaluate
166 qualification in favor of endlessly glorifying quantification, I
167 would choose quality over quantity.

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL####

168 **GEMMA SEYMOUR** is a District 8 member of
169 Brattleboro Representative Town Meeting, as well as a member of
170 the town Planning Commission.

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

LAST ISSUE IN WHICH THIS FILE CAN BE RUN:

####BEGIN MAXISSUE####

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####END MAXISSUE####

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VIDEO:

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####END VIDEO####

LOGLINE (SOCIAL MEDIA):

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174

####END LOGLINE####