

Politics and Community Values

By David H. Watters

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New Hampshire fourth graders read Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story, "The Great Stone Face" (1850), in which a young boy, Ernest, grows up in a town in the shadow of the Old Man of the Mountain. There is a prophecy that a child born nearby is "destined to become the greatest and noblest personage of his time, and [his] countenance, in manhood, should bear an exact resemblance to the Great Stone Face." After visits by a wealthy merchant, a general, a silver-tongued politician, and a poet, townspeople recognize that Ernest himself resembles the Great Stone Face. He humbly stays home and serves his neighbors, confirming the Jeffersonian ideal that leadership arises from common folk. Today, local control and a suspicion of distant authority is the granite of New Hampshire political traditions, which have persisted even as the population has absorbed waves of foreigners from other nations and "Taxachusetts." Politics and community values blend in town meeting, protest movements, family service, and the presidential primary.

In New Hampshire, town meeting annually renews democracy. Towns traditionally meet on or about the second Tuesday of March. Roads are still passable before mud season, and maple sugaring is just underway. Ranging in size from 25 to 3,500, meetings begin with the Pledge of Allegiance, and, perhaps, "America, The Beautiful." There are many elected and appointed officials, such as moderator, selectman, road agent, and, in Durham, keeper of the swans. The moderator oversees debate on warrant articles listing each town budget item. In meeting, some women knit, some sit with kids in laps, some chat around the tables selling refreshments to support the volunteer fire department. Some men stand in the back or duck outside for a smoke. All watch each dollar like a hawk. The local property tax supports the town and schools, so citizens can calculate to the penny what their votes will cost. Many towns have a community meal that "helps ease tensions:" according to Hilary Cleveland, New London's moderator. A good moderator provides the glue, which holds a community together, with simple rules and competent, fair conduct. Anyone who wants to speak may speak, and everyone speaks once before anyone speaks twice. These are the ethical values, which nourish democracy.

Legendary repositories of traditional skill and wisdom, town moderators often have an extensive kinship network which blends family and community values. Steve Taylor, Plainfield moderator since 1981, recalls visiting his first town meeting at age nine, when Palmer C. Reed presided: "He stood like a granite pillar on the stage, commanding the attention of all those before him." Everett Begore, who has served Hebron for 31 years, tries to "keep a tight ship, keep attention on the article, and hash it out." Many Hebron residents are retired on fixed incomes, so they know an increase in taxes might mean a neighbor has to sell or subdivide a farm. Funding for a new ambulance lost when one man noted he had just been transported in the old one, and it still looked all right to him.

Some issues become symbolic of a town's struggle to define its rural character. Towns around Mt. Kearsarge passed resolutions against the construction of a communications tower on the peak. In Plainfield, people debated for an hour over whether to turn off the five streetlights in the tiny hamlet of Cornish Flat. (They were left on when one resident lamented that, without the lights, people might drive through at night and never know they'd been in Cornish Flat.) Town meeting oratory has its roots in daily recitations in primary schools, 4- H Clubs and

Granges, and family and neighborly discussion. Newcomers learn quickly that persuasion outworks passion.

Town meeting emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as a bulwark of home rule during grassroots protest movements. Durham resisted Aristotle Onassis's to build a massive oil refinery on Durham Point. It became a battle over the balance of power between town and state when Governor Meldrim Thompson posed legislation to overrule town meetings, and he asked all moderators in March 1974 to present a warrant in favor of an oil refinery. Towns across the state voted this down, and on March 6, 1974, Durham defeated the proposed rezoning for the refinery 1,254 to 144. Calling home rule "the very bedrock of democracy in New Hampshire. ... from Coos to the Sea," Dudley Dudley, a descendant of Daniel Webster, led the successful fight against Thompson's legislation.

New Hampshire's conservative political culture often stands in protest against liberal ideas. William Loeb is legendary as the conservative editor of the *Manchester Union Leader*. Despite Loeb's national reputation as political kingmaker and fierce anti-communist, he always identified with patriotic working people. His front-page editorials forged the state's tough and colorful language of conservatism with a strong libertarian accent. In Robert Frost's words, "Good fences make good neighbors:"

New Hampshire politics also is shaped by family culture. The Gregg, Bass, Sununu, and Dondero/Foley families have provided generations of leadership, and many politicians seem like family because the political structure militates against the establishment of a professional political class. There are 400 state representatives paid but \$100 per annum, or one for each 2,500 residents, or four cents each per voter per year, which seems a fair bargain. Friends and family members, once elected, are "sent over to Concord" (a phrase which also can refer to sending someone to the state mental hospital there). The flip side of suspicion of distant authority is the placing of trust in generations of a family, which embodies community values.

The Gregg family arrived with the wave of Scotch-Irish settlers in 1719. Scotch-Irish independence, versatility, and entrepreneurial skills find political expression in the public service of Governor Hugh Gregg and his son Senator Judd Gregg. Hugh Gregg has been mayor of Nashua, served in Korea, was elected in 1952 the youngest governor in state history at age 34, and chaired presidential campaigns. The chronicler of the Republican Party and the presidential primary, he embodies a New Hampshire tradition whereby a community elder becomes a historian, a living archive of lore and wisdom. Judd Gregg has served as governor's councilor (1979-81), congressman (1981-89), governor (1989-93), and U.S. senator (1993-). Judd Gregg was inspired by the examples of his grandfather, who founded social service agencies, including the Crotched Mountain Rehabilitation Center, and his father. "When I was growing up it was understood that if you expected to take advantage of the wonderful and unique lifestyle that New Hampshire offers, you had an obligation to give back through participation and community service:' For the Greggs, as for many families, public service is an "honorable and important undertaking."

The Dondero/Foley family led Portsmouth for decades. Mary Carey Dondero was the first woman to serve as a mayor in the state (1945-47), and her daughter Eileen Foley served many terms (1968-72, 1984-98). Mary Dondero earned the nickname "Sweetheart of the House" for her 11 terms as a state representative in Concord. She lost a race for State Senate by one vote, but Eileen Foley made up for that by winning the seat for seven terms. Eileen

Foley describes herself as an "ordinary person" who every day wants to be "somewhere where I can feel I can do something good." Her three children continue the family tradition of public service; in the words of her daughter Mary, "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

The first-in-the-nation presidential primary shows the world the community values of New Hampshire politics. Candidates must visit kitchens, truck stops, a "Politics & Eggs" breakfast, and Robie's Country Store. People ask hard questions and expect honest answers as they look for moments, which define presidential character. Ronald Reagan paid for a microphone, George Bush climbed into an 18-wheeler, and Bill Clinton promised to remember New Hampshire people "until the last dog dies," to pass the New Hampshire test. Such luminaries are joined by dozens of unknowns, such as Caroline Killeen, "The Hemp Lady," who pay \$1,000 to place their names on the ballot. Killeen, age 72, advocates the legalization of marijuana. Traveling everywhere by bicycle, her 1992 slogan was "America needs trees, not Bushes."

On primary day, conversation at the polls turns to the weather and local taxes. Voters mark paper ballots in booths with red, white, and blue curtains. The first results come in right after midnight, from Dixville Notch, where voters gather at the Balsams Hotel to cast a dozen or so votes. Neil Tillotson, the 100-year-old moderator, has been the first person in America to vote in presidential elections since 1964. Twenty-four hours later, the candidates and the press have gone, and the next snowstorm covers up the campaign signs of winners and losers.

Jeremy Belknap concluded his *History of New Hampshire* (1792) with a "vision of a happy society." A good society needs schools, farms, merchants, a clergyman, and a library, but there should be "no intriguing politician, horse jockey, gambler or sot; but all such characters treated with contempt." With such a warning, New Hampshire people for two centuries have judged politics and politicians by the values of their communities.

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Suggested Reading

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