

The Council on the Future of Vermont

From Conversations 7-10-08 Barre

1. What does Vermont mean to you? What common values do Vermonters share?

As an 8th generation Vermonter, the meaning of the state for me has a lot of connection with my own family history. I believe that for folks whose people have lived in Vermont for many generations, this will often be the case. Because Vermont had a relatively stagnant population from the Civil War until the 1960s, often shedding the young and bright to other states, the identity of the state could be measured around intertwining family histories in many towns and villages. This seems to me to be a key factor in what old timers mean when we speak of Vermont: a nexus of stories, places, people and events that weave into a relatively coherent fabric that is shared by a common group of people over a number of generations.

The natural beauty and cheap land in Vermont attracted folks from away from the 60s through the 80s. This large influx of people from away and their children now probably account for a high percentage of the population, and certainly a very high percentage of people in positions of economic, social and political power. As a consequence of this, a large segment of Vermonters value aspects of Vermont life in contradistinction to their previous home environs, and interpret Vermont events from the cultural perspective of those previous home environs and experiences.

The reference points we use make a difference in how we find meaning in places, stories and people. The older population is historically referenced here, while the newer folks are referenced against what they wanted to leave behind and what they wanted to bring with them.

The values of young people today represent a significant shift from previous generations. This is due, in part to the pervasiveness of TV and the internet, the decline of the intact (2 adults with children) family as a functional socio-economic unit, the erosion of economic conditions in which many children live, and the shifting culture of the public schools.

Another significant cause of the shift in values of the younger generation comes from the nearly complete breakdown of the associational levels of community interaction which used to provide the glue, as it were, holding family units in relationship to the community and larger and more formal relationships. The decline in participation in churches, social and fraternal clubs, civic clubs, organizations like the Grange, veterans associations, as well as trade based groups is a radical departure from what was a quintessential American social pattern for the first two centuries of the republic.

Today's young people do not have this sort of affiliation. To some extent the school functions for a portion of the population as the only associational level organization, but the focus is on children rather intergenerational life or the adult community in which children are given boundaries and nurture. The effect is amplified by the regional Jr/Sr. High School.

As a consequence, youth are highly oriented to small peer groups which form the core areas for the formation and interpretation of "reality perceptions." Social realities that operate on other levels are ignored or simply distrusted, while large institutions are viewed in terms of entitlements and dashed hopes.

Postmodern world views are increasingly present, but, since Vermont lags behind in social trends, postmodernism is not fully developed here. Nevertheless, distrustfulness, cliques, cynicism, abandonment of rationalism, and embrace of personal feelings as the source of value seem to be on the rise.

The view of Vermont that the younger folks evidence tends to be diminished in scope relative to their views of peer groups and national/international popular culture. Vermont increasingly lacks meaning for this group. The environment is an exception to this, since many young people express a strong concern for the Vermont natural environment and about issues such as global warming. But the absence of a Vermont focus is also reflected in the emigration of the young that has become a demographic concern to some. Because Vermont is not a high valance significant locus of meaning, Vermont does not receive much loyalty.

The older generations of Vermonters appear to remain hooked on their meaning systems relative to the state: old timers reflecting the web of generational interactions and new timers reflecting their fears, anxieties, hopes and dreams for what Vermont should and should not be.

A growing number of the poor and working poor have meaning horizons that no longer include community and associational relationships, but interpersonal relationships that are constantly in turmoil and struggle. Long term marriage or life relationships seem to be almost unexpected and foreign to many. Men and boys are especially handicapped by a lack of male role models who embrace community, association, family, spouse and parent relationships in meaningful ways. Often men are absent or unsafe in the lives of children and youth.

We work with kids who have no safe and healthy relationships with men outside of school. As a result the boys and girls have very little self-value and conduct themselves accordingly. Hedonism is the substitute value system.

2. Looking ahead through our lifetimes and those of our children, what challenges and opportunities do you see for Vermont?

The future for Vermont looks very bleak. As the national economy falters, peak oil production comes and goes, and the oil-based economic system into which Vermont has been pulled over the past 50 years ratchets up the size of the chasm between rich and poor, many Vermonters are going to be suffering.

The siren call of development in the 50s and 60s was that all Vermonters' wealth and lifestyles would take a jump if investment were made here in new development. This has not proven to be true. In fact, many Vermonters who were largely self-sufficient economic farming units or workers who also did small scale farming at home have died, leaving new generations who have lost basic agricultural skills and knowledge. What is more, the availability of other work that provides a livable wage is fast disappearing. Wealth was accumulated here in Vermont by the systematic extraction of assets (mostly land value) and labor from the subsistence farming families, but that wealth has now been removed from the state, or at least from the arena where ordinary Vermonters benefit from it.

It is popular to blame Act 250 and other development control laws for the lack of business here. I would demur to that claim. The development control laws contributed to a concentration of wealth and power in the hands of those who had the wherewithal to

navigate the bureaucratic systems. This made the start up costs too great for most Vermonters and this problem continues. However, this phenomenon is actually part of a larger trend than environmental regulation--it is at the heart of the division of functions between government and large capitalist enterprise. Government is intended to create the legal framework for the big guys to make money and it does this by creating systems that little guys and gals cannot navigate. Small business is growing weaker and weaker as a result.

The structural consequences of this for Vermont are enormous. Wealth has been concentrated and exported, leaving the many with little land, skill, or socio-economic resources. This third world experience is not slowing in Vermont, but escalating.

The collapse of associational and community relationships has accompanied this economic squeeze, so that the poor and working poor are unable to make the entry barriers into the livable wage zone, even if there were jobs. While the government has tried to diminish barriers through intelligent modifications of statutory welfare programs, the contextual decay of the economic and social fabric of the state has made these efforts less than successful.

Consequences at hand include the rising food-fuel crisis that will overwhelm charities and existing government resources, leaving many without house, heat or home. Survivalism is on the rise and will make talk of Vermont meaningless to many. Massive social and economic dislocations will only exacerbate the problems.

Concurrently, the educated upper middle economic groups who are predominantly people who moved to Vermont in the last 50 years and their children, are charting a course for the future of Vermont that will preserve those aspects of Vermont that they cherish. This does not necessarily include the wellbeing of the poor. It could and should.

3. What should our priorities be as we work together to realize your vision and prepare Vermont for the future?

First, we should put **an emphasis on religious/moral pluralism**. This means putting a stop to the anti-Christian rhetoric and conduct of the schools, and create a truly pluralistic community. I have heard numerous stories involving many schools where teachers have publicly humiliated youth for their Christian beliefs. This needs to stop. Moreover, the schools need to create an environment (that is fully consistent with the Supreme Court rulings on religion) in which the religions of the students and the culture are taught so that they all understand the values and world views of the religions. This will help kids to form their own world views and moral systems, and never impose or dictate adherence to any religion or no religion. Moreover, it will enable young people to interpret literature, history and culture with a more complete set of intellectual tools. We live in a world that is highly interconnected and our lack of understanding about Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism is producing foolish public opinion and government policies. Pluralism needs to be understood as the Canadians practice it.

Second, the **state needs to take full responsibility financially for the burdens it has cost shifted to the municipalities**. This includes the cost of special education and other educational mandates, the care of the mentally ill and developmentally challenged, the community supervision and rehabilitation of criminals, drug and alcohol addicts, and other social services that now rely on town meeting contributions. The cost of

environmental protection now borne by municipalities should be a state burden. These are common problems and need common funding based on a progressive form of taxation.

Third, all governmental policies need to be reviewed and modified to enhance and **enable collaboration between government and community organizations**, including religious ones. The Department of Community Affairs needs to assist community organizations to collaborate together and to ramp up their programming and grant writing, evaluation, empirical data bases, and execution to the standards expected by funders. This is essential to placing these associational groups back into the fabric of the community and state, so that they can perform the buffering, mentoring, and supportive functions that help people live effectively in community. While there are undoubtedly aspects of many organizations' goals and beliefs that cannot be supported by tax dollars, those aspects that are in the public interest need support and should get it. A significant increase in associational activity would be indicative of a reduction in poverty, crime and other social dysfunctions—and reduce demand on the entitlement programs. Where there is a strong pluralistic multi-stranded web of community that includes everyone, there is hope, power and a future. Where it is absent, there is only turmoil and decline.

Fourth, **small business, micro enterprise, innovation centers and small scale agriculture need real support, encouragement and resourcing**. This needs to be a high priority in all aspects of regulation, planning and government, not just another SBA program. It will require more investment in work ethic, social skills and other tools necessary to succeed in business, including serious mentoring, especially when this is offered to the chronically poor. There could be a simple form for entering into and conducting such business that would enable folks to do with out lawyers and accountants, while relying on mentors and peer teams. How about giving these enterprises the tax breaks that are current wasted on large industrial and commercial corporations that rarely pay their way in social and local economic capital.

Fifth, let's actually **work on the real causes of poverty** rather than playing the blame game and continuing to build a class of unemployables. We need livable wage jobs, work skill training (more of this), child care, healthcare for all, especially those moving out of poverty, descent affordable housing, much better transportation systems that focus on public transit rather than the auto, incentives for folks to try legitimate business ventures and mentors to accompany them. A must: DCF and similar agencies need more staff and resources to do their jobs.

Sixth, we should have a **broad mandatory youth corps program** that takes every kid and teaches him/her some personal discipline, work ethic and the value of community service, basic agricultural skills, basic financial skills, basic technological skills, fire arms safety, and the rules of adulthood. These young people could be put to work assisting the elderly and disabled, local government, parks and forests, etc.

Seventh, we must **address the epidemic of addictions**—not with more jail time, but effective treatment, early interventions, long periods of accountability, and something better to do with time, money and energy. Accountability needs to start early and remain vigorously enforced.

Eighth, replace the property tax with a **wealth tax** that treats real estate, stocks, bonds, and other tangible and intangible assets on the same basis; and then assess the tax based on an income **sensitive progressive rate structure**, so that the truly wealthy pay, while land poor do not.

Finally, we need to **put value discussions back on the table** often. What are our values. How do they differ? What common values flow from deep religious faith that help society? What values do we expect to govern our common life? We need more than greed, gluttony and selfishness! We need to see ourselves as much more than consumers or laborers. We need a serious reflection on and practice of high standards of moral life, rather than a live and let live, laissez-faire approach to values. And we need to challenge one another to live up to the highest values that our respective traditions and moral systems proclaim. We ought to make talk of Christian biblical values, Torah, Koranic law, and other value systems part of the discussion, often and openly. We can embrace common moral standards from differing moral systems and find community with one another at the same time. Heading high, we will do far better than the lowest common denominator.

Respectfully Submitted,

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