

DOWN WITH MEETINGS

Among its definitions of "meet," my Oxford University Dictionary gives "to encounter or oppose in battle," again "to oppose, cope or grapple with (something impersonal)." Even meeting someone's eye involves the cocky willingness "to submit oneself to his look without turning away," and meeting (n.) sometimes is a euphemism for a duel. In other words, the very etymology of this device for rational discussion and intellectual resolution of problems involves belligerency. Certainly the spate of "emergency" and "prótest" meetings which are routinely called today, of "rallies" and "crusades" launched for this cause or against that one, proves the point.

Yet, despite such an overheated mental climax, not to mention the creature discomforts, The Meeting theoretically composes deep-seated dif-

ferences, works out complex solutions of delicate problems and achieves lasting results by "democratic processes." I submit that this is manifestly impossible on the face of it.

Those who profess to believe that large outpourings of confused citizenry somehow represent democracy in its finest workings often cite as precedent the New England Town Meeting of yesteryear. I, too, feel a proud, nostalgic identification with this Yankee heritage, but let's face it. Like the village green which has become a parking lot, the immemorial elms which have succumbed to blight, the Town Meeting is archaic, and it betrays that ultimate Yankee heritage — common-sense — to pretend otherwise.

Perhaps, though I have some reservations, small groups of neighbors meeting to discuss small and mutual-

ly understood problems such as road work in lieu of taxes could efficiently co-transact business. But that is altogether different from large gatherings of comparative strangers of widely different backgrounds who pass off-the-cuff on technical reports drafted by experts. In this latter instance, The Meeting is far more dangerous than democratic because those with axes to grind can mislead public ignorance and cloak the strange result in a large vote of endorsement.

In some organizations, it is routine parliamentary tactics for rival groups to race to get the first resolution on the floor, the theory being that the first one presented is the first one voted. Among Communist cadres, this trick is worked in reverse. I have seen them filibuster meetings till every normal man has left in disgust for bar or bed, where upon they whip through the party-line resolutions. When I read that some ringing protest has been adopted "in the name of" of this-or-that organization and its presumably outraged membership, I ask myself

two or three questions. How many stayed with it to the vote? How many really knew what they were voting about? How many lacked the moral courage to vote No?

Perhaps I am just a cynical old sinner, but from what I have seen of meetings and the ill temper they engender, the number of "unanimous" votes reported passeth understanding. As an example, I cite a Town Meeting not so long ago in my native Connecticut where this has been a way of government for some 300 years. First, the town clerk forgot her minutes of the previous meeting and delayed everything while she went home for them. Then proponents of zoning were shouted down as they tried to speak, and as always, somebody challenged the very legality of the meeting. A clergyman lost his temper and stalked out, a woman fainted, and a reporter noted wonderingly: "There wasn't a word said in a temperate tone."

This parliamentary fiasco confirms my own youthful newspaper experiences covering Town Meetings around Fairfield, Weston and West-

port where the rich New Yorkers can now outvote the clammers and farmers. Once, I remember, practically the only Democrat in town (at that time) kept 1,000 voters — and me — in session till 1 A.M. by demanding that each individually prove his franchise and submit a written ballot rather than an oral *aye* or *noy*. It was, of course, what we used to call pure swamp-Yankee cussedness, but none of the thoughtful element, including at least one millionaire, could think of any way of outwitting him. So, if the Yankees themselves, after 300 years, can't control their own invention, the fault must lie in the inherent unworkability of The Meeting.

There is, in all meetings, a basically insoluble problem which must be frustrating to the organization leaders, though none of them seems to have thought it through. A small meeting at which issues could be rationally discussed and quickly voted might accomplish something, but it is generally considered a waste of everybody's time, a rebuff to the leader-

ship and an economic extravagance because of the custodial overhead. Success is gauged by "turnout" — and that brings us full circle to the large meeting and all its intellectual frivolity.

Exasperating as the governmental and protest-type meetings are, with all their bickerings, those other meetings which theoretically promote such admirable, if elusive, goals as good fellowship, understanding and peace on earth can be equally trying. In fact, I think that if the Good Fairy were to grant me lifelong immunity from any particular type of meeting, I would choose the men's luncheon clubs. Some of my friends are Rotarians, others follow the Kiwanis persuasion, and a few, I think, are Lions. Individually, they are fine fellows: but the strenuous jollity and aggressive good humor which are the hallmarks of their meetings I find insupportable.

If I may be forgiven another reminiscence of my sensitive journalistic youth, I once patrolled the hotel beat which included, in addition to interviews with dig-

nitaries passing through town, daily coverage of the luncheon clubs. So dismal was this chore that the opposition reporter and I made a deal, though in those days scoops and mutual suspicions still enlivened newspaper work. I covered for both Mondays and Wednesdays, he grimly attended Tuesdays and Thursdays, and we flipped a coin to see who got stuck Fridays. Both of us just couldn't stand five days running of fellowship, and it was so restful to sit downstairs in the hotel lobby and not have to listen!

For some reason, and the only one I can think of is that this country has a national inferiority complex, the incorrigibly gregarious, the maritally maladjusted who don't dare spend a night home alone with their wives and the other sincere meeting-lovers refuse to meet just for the hell of it. Always, they attach some unassailable good cause or overwhelming crisis to the call, thus playing on my guilt feelings to force my attendance. Nor will they settle for my money or my signature on a petition; some-

thing that smacks of sadism also demands my personal inconvenience.

Lots of other Americans — the vast majority, I suspect — must feel at least somewhat as I do; and with courage and firmness, we could do something about The Meeting. I do not delude myself that such an ingrained bad habit will be quickly cured, but we can individually launch a tapering-off process by our own stubborn *non-attendance*. We can try to persuade the various meeting-happy organizations to which we belong to restrain themselves to quarterly, semi-annual or even better, annual sessions.

Meantime, the officers and committees, who hold the power and responsibility anyhow, can meet as often as they please. If they must talk, let them talk to each other. For serious membership-wide affairs, they can submit written reports by mail and let us vote by postcard ballot. The effort of putting thought on paper will force them to make a more logical presentation, and my vote, in the undistracted privacy of my

home, will be a more thoughtful vote. Even when the posts from Virginia to Massachusetts were notably bad, it seems to me, the Founding Fathers accomplished more in those long, cool correspondences they carried on from their quiet studies than in their face-to-face wrang-

lings in New York and Philadelphia.

In essence, The Meeting is an archaic, time-wasting, temper-straining, inefficient device; a problem to the police, fire and sanitation departments; a threat to simple family life.

I move we adjourn! — *Henry Lee, from Mercury.*

SOUNDS BETTER WITH MUSIC

There was one point on which Mark Twain and his wife were at odds, and that was Mark's profanity. Knowing how his use of the strong word afflicted her, he used to indulge himself when she was out of earshot.

One Sunday morning while he was agonizing through the shaving and dressing hour, with language suited only to the privacy of the bathroom, he discovered that his shirt was shy a button. It was too much! Mark swore in his best manner. His oaths continued with magnificent virtuosity. Then he heard a gentle cough.

The bathroom door was open, and there stood his wife! With a withering look she repeated his last irreverent blast.

"Oh, Livy," he said, "did it sound like that?"

"It certainly did," she answered. "Only worse."

Said Mark sorrowfully: "It would pain me to think that when I swear it sounds like that. You get the words right, Livy, but you don't know the tune!" — *Tyler Mason.*