

PUREST FORM OF DEMOCRACY???

Many members of Plymouth's Charter Commission and others desiring to maintain the status quo repeatedly use the phrase, "**Plymouth's government represents the purest form of democracy.**"

Really? Plymouth actually gave up "the purest form of democracy" 70 years ago. Here's why.

Many say this. For example, it is prominent in the description of Town Meetings by William Galvin, Massachusetts Secretary of State, who writes, "*The purest form of democratic governing is practiced in a Town Meeting. In use for over 300 years and still today, it has proven to be a valuable means for many Massachusetts taxpayers to voice their opinions and **directly** (emphasis added) effect change in their communities.*" It is important to note that his reference is to a direct or open meeting (wherein all eligible citizens can vote). **Plymouth does not have an open Town Meeting. We gave it up as unworkable 70 years ago. We now have and have had for 70 years a representative form of government in which voting is limited to a select few.**

"Open" Town Meetings date from our earliest days and the Mayflower Compact. Eligible citizens (white, male, landowners at the time) met to vote on and decide issues of the day. Attendance was often mandatory. Over time, in towns where populations grew rapidly it was practically impossible to have meetings where everyone attended, could be heard, and voted. "Open" meetings grew larger and were found to be unwieldy and often unrepresentative of larger populations (p.6, Town Meeting Time).

In 1820, the General Court passed legislation allowing for cities (mayor and alderman/city council) to be formed. In 1822, Boston (with a population of 45,000) was the first such city approved by the General Court. Salem (with a population of 40,400) was the 2nd in 1836. Plymouth, isolated from the main shipping routes of the day, remained an isolated seacoast town with a population of under 5,000 inhabitants.

In addition to allowing a city form of government to solve this problem, in 1912 the General Court passed laws to allow **representative** town meetings. Over 70 years ago in 1952, Plymouth with a population of 13,700, voted to change from an **open** to **representative** town meeting.

As a result, the only people in Plymouth who get to directly vote on legislative affairs are 135 Town Meeting members. They **represent** the rest of us. So, today we have a **representative** form of government. Other than scale (135 representatives vs. 9 – 15 councilors) there is no difference conceptually between town meeting members and a city council in which councilors or aldermen are elected to represent their constituents.

The only other **direct** democratic actions that may be taken are ballot referendums and recall elections. Our general elections serve to elect representatives, not directly vote on issues.

This important distinction was even made as far back as our US Constitutional Convention in 1787. At the time of the convention in Philadelphia our founding thinkers, including John Madison writing in Federalist No. 14 spoke of democracy and made a clear distinction between a **direct** democracy and a republic (representative democracy). The crucial difference was that a republic relied on representation, while in a "pure" democracy, the people represented themselves. He found direct government only worked for a "small spot". At that time Philadelphia, then the largest US city had a population of 40,000 and had been incorporated as a city with a city council since 1701. Plymouth with over 64,532 residents, 47,098 registered voters and encompassing an area of 134 sq. mi. can hardly be considered a "small spot"?

So, what should our charter commissioners do? If they truly believe in **direct and pure democracy**, the clear answer is to let the voters decide in a referendum. Prepare an updated recommendation for both a town meeting charter AND prepare a charter providing for a council form of government. **Let the voters decide in a direct election at the ballot.**