

The issue moved to the Senate. In committee, three senators announced that they wanted a constitutional amendment, a cumbersome, expensive, and time-consuming process, to prohibit same-sex marriage. Proponents of the idea claimed it would put the issue in the hands of the people and show the Supreme Court that it couldn't, as one supporter put it, "drive its truck through a hole in the document." Meanwhile, groups stepped up their endorsements and attacks. One Vermont group called Take It to the People insisted the term "civil union" was a ruse. If a civil union had the legal rights of marriage, the ceremonies of marriage, and the physical appearance of marriage, then wasn't it a marriage? No, the Senate decided in late April with a nineteen-to-eleven vote, it was a civil union. Though there were negative reactions from the gay community claiming its members were being treated like secondary citizens, the vote marked a highpoint in the protracted battle for gay rights in America. The traditional live-and-let-live attitude that often suffused Vermont politics had again prevailed, allowing it to pass the law quickly, similar versions of which had stalled in Hawaii and California, and have it signed immediately by Governor Dean.

Meanwhile, as America paid more attention than usual to Vermont because of the rights of gay couples, a Dutch/English multinational corporation, Unilever, was chasing two of the state's folk heroes, Ben and Jerry, toward a shotgun wedding of sorts. The pursuit started just about the time the Supreme Court made its ruling on the rights of gay couples in December 1999. Unilever and Dreyer's Grand Ice Cream, Inc., both had decided that a takeover of Vermont's super premium ice cream company complemented their interests. To avoid the hungry giants, each of which dangled stock offers well above the market asking price as bait, Ben Cohen pulled together a group of private, socially minded investors headed by Anita Roddick, founder of The Body Shop International, to keep the company out of the hands of a multinational. The effort fizzled, though, shot down by financing complications and disgruntled stockholders who threatened to sue if they didn't maximize their stock price. In April 2000, Unilever got Vermont's best-known brand for \$326 million, or about \$43 a share.

It seemed an ignominious end to the almost legendary tale of two laid-back hippies who started a company in a gas station in downtown Burlington and made it a model of corporate responsibility in America while also selling a lot of Vermont-made ice cream. Ben and Jerry's Homemade had endured some embarrassments in the nineties, including a class-action lawsuit that cost it \$1.1 million, and the closing of a once-ballyhooed daycare center for employees at the Waterbury plant and tourism center. But the company still donated 7½ percent of pretax profits to an array of causes, employed seven hundred people, and kept a lot of bovines BST free by buying its milk from the St. Albans Cooperative Creamery with the insistence it be growth-hormone free.

Reactions about the sale were mixed. Acquisition by a huge company run by suits in Holland and England meant the end of Ben and Jerry's as Vermonters

knew it, said some critics. Others said not to worry, the company was going to be able to keep its own board of directors, stay in Vermont, keep its social vision.

Maybe. But would the foreign suits continue to throw free annual events such as the One World One Heart Festival, a music and consciousness-raising affair started back in 1991, with performances in San Francisco, Chicago, and at Sugarbush? Would it tolerate company spokespersons critical of globalization and its impact on rural farmers and working people in the third world? Having myself briefly been a corporate vassal and as a holder of an MBA, I can say confidently, No. Relations will change to reflect the philosophy of the multinational owners, whatever that is. But you can be sure it won't be the same as the original, or even the matured, Ben and Jerry's Homemade, Inc. Unilever could be bought by BigSoap.com, which in turn could be taken over by BiggerSoap.com, all in a couple of years. No one has a crystal ball to peer into the mutinous heart of global big business.

On the other hand, it was also unreasonable to expect Ben and Jerry's to continue on its responsible, fun-loving ways forever. Public ownership, which brought good profits to many Vermonters, including myself, and disgruntled others, such as the stockholder group that sued in 1994 and threatened to sue again when Ben Cohen attempted his short-lived privatization effort in early 2000, usually erodes the ideals of founders, replacing them with profitability and bottom-line thinking. An independent, do-good little company thriving for twenty years was a minor miracle in its own right. A better question was, who might take the ice cream company's place? Magic Hat, the Burlington brewery that sponsored parades, concerts, and art with a kind of loose, the-world's-okay attitude reminiscent of Ben and Jerry's at its social zenith, seemed the only contender for the crown.

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The kind of business utopia that Ben and Jerry's had, at its best, tried to create was a far cry from corporate America of the nineties, with its rampant consolidations, downsizings, bloated salaries for upper-echelon executives, and glorification of the "market" as the final arbiter of all values. Dystopias—corporate, political, and ethnic—were far more numerous, in America and around the world. The attitude that public involvement and action could shape change in a country, a state, or a town had paled, though far less in Vermont than in most other places. Therefore, a weekend spent watching gigantic puppets, pageantry, and satirical sideshows in a pine forest, all for free, in Glover, Vermont, where you could camp and get a taste of what it might have been like living in the sixties ("There's, like, campfires and drum circles, you know, a real communal kind of thing, you just walk up to someone's campfire and you introduce yourself and um, you know, if someone walks up . . .") was an oddity. A refreshing, inspiring oddity.

But there it was, up in the Northeast Kingdom, a surviving remnant of another vision, one of peace and justice and equality fostered with bread