

Summary of the Meeting with John Brandl

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Wednesday, September 14, 2005

A. Present: Verne Johnson, chair (by phone); Chuck Clay, Jim Hetland (by phone), John Mooty, Jim Olson (by phone), John Sampson, Clarence Shallbetter, Paul Gilje, and John Brandl, guest.

B. Presentation by John Brandl--John Sampson introduced Brandl, professor, Humphrey Institute, University of Minnesota. Brandl is a former president of the Citizens League, served 12 years in the Minnesota Legislature, and also worked for many years in the federal government in Washington, D.C. Brandl was invited to share his comments with us on the caucus report, "America's Political Process is in Grave Danger." In his introductory comments, Brandl made these points:

1. Need for "virtue"--He made reference to two papers, Federalist No. 10, concerning factions, or special interests, and Federalist No. 51, the theme of which is "we're not angels," Brandl said, "we need constraints." In Federalist No. 10, Madison was concerned about adequately controlling factions. We think of politics only as a clash of interest groups, Madison warned us. If that's all politics is, the government won't work. We need virtue. Placing virtue into the process becomes possible, he said, when non-governmental entities that depend on good will are given an opportunity to provide services.

2. Rely more on non-governmental institutions--Americans today have extreme expectations of what government can do for them. We have built-in disappointment because we expect so much. Much of what government does can be done better through non-governmental institutions. Brandl recalled that while campaigning for office several years ago he met a couple with a child with severe mental retardation, who was being cared for by the state. A change in that approach occurred whereby the family was given a monthly stipend from the government and allowed to care for the child themselves. The cost was about one-tenth of institutionalization but provided better care.

Brandl said that Madison favored competition in government. Government can decide what needs to be done but ought not be the only vehicle for doing something. Brandl gets in trouble with his political party because he is an advocate of education vouchers for families.

In summary, he said that competition is an effective constraint on power of special interest groups and that non-governmental entities that depend on the good will of their participants can insert "virtue" into the process.

3. Evaluation of the points in the Caucus draft--Some proposals in the draft do get at the problem of "factions" or "special interest groups". He said that specifically, we've got to take away the power of the legislative body to determine its own district boundaries. Some of the points in the draft do not attack the problem.

D. Question-and-answer session with Brandl--During the discussion the following points were made:

1. Validity of the statement of the problem--Brandl was asked to evaluate the 19 points made early in the draft that discuss concerns, not solutions. He agreed that media coverage is a problem. So much of what the media reports is only a clash of interest groups. He sensed the problem also in yesterday's hearings on the Roberts nomination for Chief Justice, in which some Senators were trying to put more words in the nominee's mouth.

Brandl wondered whether it might be possible to change the discourse in the public media, because what is happening today is diminishing respect for the entire system.

2. Campaign spending difficult to deal with--Every time we try to fix this problem we fail. It seems as if we need to find a way to live with it.

3. Growth of single-interest groups--It's been about 30 years since Brandl first ran for office. During this time the number of single-interest groups has grown considerably. They are ever more specific and insistent. An interest group insists that a candidate adhere to every point, without exception.

4. Shift in local-state-federal responsibilities--Brandl agreed that people seem to look much more to the federal government today. However, we're of two minds. On the one hand people want government to be involved, and on the other hand, people have libertarian ideas. Brandl said that a key challenge is to strengthen state and local government, especially state government.

5. Creating competitive congressional districts--It was noted that the California proposal doesn't require that districts be competitive and, in fact, certain states with commissions (Iowa and Arizona) don't seem to have created competitive districts. Brandl said he would favor that such commissions be required to make districts as competitive as possible. He acknowledged that the Civil Rights Act guarantees that some districts won't be competitive.

6. Evaluation of the caucus system for selecting convention delegates--Brandl said the system is not working. In his party, DFL, caucuses can elect people who specifically represent interest groups. What has happened more recently, he said, is that fewer and fewer people are attending the caucuses, so such sub-caucuses no longer are as needed. Now whoever shows up at the caucus will have a good chance of being elected, because of poor attendance.

7. Example of the Katrina aftermath--The group discussed briefly the example of Katrina as an illustration of today's difficulty in knowing what state and local government should be doing, in light of people's high expectations of the federal government.

8. Over-reliance on the federal dollar--It was noted that so many people today are seeking the federal dollar. The "pork" in the recent transportation bill was mentioned. Brandl mentioned that an extra-majority of votes is required for a bonding bill in Minnesota, but that requirement seemed to backfire in the most recently adopted bill. The Legislature just enlarged the "pork" to get the extra votes.

9. Causes of polarization--Brandl said the rise of the interest groups and gerrymandering seem to be the chief causes of polarization. Another person noted that a contributing factor is that more and more people are expecting government to do things for them and, therefore, set up interest groups to advocate on their behalf.

One person asked how we can blame gerrymandering because the Senate seems as polarized as the House.

10. Possible corrective action--Brandl said when he was in the Minnesota Senate he prepared--but didn't introduce--a bill that would have given all voters in the state the right to elect State Senators. Each year eight State Senators would be elected, one from each congressional district, but voters throughout the state would cast ballots for all eight.

11. Reviewing the possible solutions--Asked to comment on the list of possible solutions in the draft, Brandl highlighted the redistricting idea. Many of the others aren't going to solve the problems of special interests, he said.

12. Improving the educational system--Brandl was asked, in light of the founding fathers' interest in an informed citizenry, how we can accomplish such an objective today. Kids get most of their information from TV, which is a national media system. Brandl agreed that this is a serious problem.

13. Different kinds of "special interests"?--Asked to identify special interests that contribute to polarization, Brandl singled out the teachers union and the no-tax groups. One person wondered whether groups that don't involve a personal economic stake for its participants, such as groups advocating for parks, should be placed in the same category. Brandl mentioned Madison's definition of a special interest, or faction, as a group that advances its interest at the expense of the public interest. Brandl recalled that when he was in the Legislature he tried to develop a proposal that would compromise on abortion, but both the pro-choice and pro-life people opposed it.

E. Thanks--The group thanked Brandl for meeting with us.