

# Summary of Meeting with Arne Carlson

Civic Caucus

Monday, November 14, 2005

**Attendance:** Verne C. Johnson, chair; Chuck Clay, Jim Hetland, John Sampson (by phone), Clarence Shallbetter, Paul Gilje, and Arne Carlson, guest

**A. Introduction of Arne Carlson**--Verne introduced Carlson, former member of the Minneapolis City Council, former member of the Minnesota Legislature, former State Auditor, former Governor, and currently chairman of RiverSource Funds. In his comments Carlson made the following points:

**1. Current political environment is causing irreparable harm, locally and nationally**--It is baffling to Carlson to see all the emphasis today on such issues as same sex marriage and gun control, which really represent side agendas to what is really significant. The nation and this state are producing overpowering deficits. He acknowledged that the Minnesota Legislature is required to adopt a balanced budget, but by shuffled resources and borrowing, the Legislature is escaping its responsibility to be upfront on revenues. Moreover, it is using such words as "assessment" and "fee" and taking funds from the tobacco settlement. The money wasn't borrowed from the tobacco fund, it was taken. Once those resources are spent, you have a higher level of expenditures to maintain without a source of revenue.

Carlson contrasted today's environment with that of the '60s, '70s, '80s. He said the Citizens League influence was enormous in those days. People in the Legislature were anxious to sponsor bills supported by the Citizens League because had done its research and people knew the ideas had support. Of course, there was opposition, he said. He recalled the League's leadership on metropolitan governance, which was the League's trademark. Looking back, it is tempting to say that effort was simple, but it was a bloody fight, with lots of controversy.

**2. Focus on a narrow, can-do agenda**--Carlson has read our preliminary position paper and has read summaries of our meetings with other thought leaders. He encouraged the Civic Caucus to concentrate on a few issues, not too many.

**3. Transfer redistricting to panel of judges**--America is supposed to be raising the flag of democracy around the world, but it is impossible for our nation to be respected in such an effort with the emphasis on incumbent protection today. The current system, in which the elected officials who are affected make the redistricting decisions, amounts to rigging elections.

**4. Make laws promulgated by the legislative body apply to that body, too**--Legislative bodies pass laws that apply to others but occasionally exempt themselves. For example, he noted that Congress has passed laws prohibiting insider trading of securities. Yet some people wonder if Congress itself is above the law in the way congressional portfolios are structured. Their finances should be transparent.

Another example he gave concerns carrying weapons. The Legislature enacts strict controls to monitor weapons at the state capitol but then passes other laws that require public meetings elsewhere in the state to allow people to carry concealed weapons. Any policy should be uniform.

Clarence and John S. noted that legislative bodies treat themselves differently on pension plans, too. John S. noted that the Congress is exempt from Social Security.

**5. Revisit the area of metro governance**--While this subject isn't directly related to the American democracy question, Carlson strongly believes that the Metropolitan Council represents an area of strength for Minnesota and that the question of serving outlying counties with metropolitan services needs to be addressed.

**B. Discussion with Carlson**--During the discussion with Carlson the following points were made:

**1. Move primaries ahead of party endorsement**--When Brian Sullivan and Tim Pawlenty were seeking GOP endorsement, both were tripping over one another trying to get to the far right, Carlson said. In a primary, people fly much more moderate flags. If the primary is early, then it is likely that candidates would seek broader appeal. Subsequently, parties could decide on endorsement.

**2. Stay away from instant runoff voting**--Carlson believes the Caucus should stay away from ideas that are complicated, such as instant runoff voting. It was pointed out that such an approach would encourage candidates to adopt more moderate positions to broaden their appeal.

**3. Federal deficit "beyond disgraceful"**--The federal budget is unconscionable, Carlson said. We're spending in the wrong areas such as pork and failing to cover the spending with revenues. The burden needs to be on candidates in the next election, both Republican and Democrat, to explain why they supported the budget.

In the area of accounting, the Federal Government is a disaster. If corporations or state and local government handled their books in the same fashion, they would be hauled to court. Government finance should demonstrate integrity. Never should fudging of numbers be tolerated.

To allow spending to grow without facing the tax consequences forces your successor to increase taxes.

**4. Why have the parties changed?**--Carlson said the far right found that they could use television to broaden their political base, just as Evangelical ministers have used TV for broadening their faith base. Also the far right found excesses in the liberal agenda that were offensive. He wishes more could be done to call people like Pat Robertson to account for what they are saying. The media have a major responsibility here.

**5. Find leadership in younger entrepreneurs**--Carlson said that many younger business leaders and their companies are not visible in the political process but they would love to be players, just as other business leaders were active in the past.

**6. Have more real debates between candidates and open primaries**--It's not the media's role to decide which issues to highlight. The media should find a way to let the candidates express themselves. He bemoans the fact that the media look for the 10-second sound bites, possibly peppered with conflict. Stadium questions guarantee instant attention. He doesn't like that the media hide behind the claim that

they are giving the people what they want. He believes the media should publish their journalistic standards yearly and represent the finest traditions in journalism. Carlson yearns for something akin to the Lincoln-Douglas debates. He said an open primary would help a great deal in making it possible for issues to surface. An open primary favors the people over the party.

**7. Concern about campaign pledges--**The concern over campaign pledges is serious and it is growing. These promises to special interest groups are normally kept from the purview of the public. The recent focus on the pledge involving a commitment to “oppose any and all tax increases” has received some attention. However, the media never really focused on the implications of that pledge during the campaign nor did they call the Governor and the legislators who signed that pledge to task when that pledge was violated. For instance, any support for a stadium that is publicly financed violates that pledge. This is also true when there is a move to increase local effort in the school aid formula or when there is support for a local government mill rate increase. Pledges should be scrutinized by the media and the focus should be on full public disclosure. The public has a right to know what private promises candidates have made to special interest groups. This would have a chilling effect on the willingness of candidates to sign away the public good.

**8. Campaign finance changes supported--**Carlson favors public funding. He also favors rules that would prohibit legislators from collecting campaign contributions from those groups that they regulate. Asked about requiring disclosure of the source of funds given by 527 groups, Carlson said if an association wants to support a candidate, he has no trouble with that. Clarence wondered whether the public would support spending more money for such endeavors as public funding for campaigns. Carlson believes an education process would work to get support for public funding. The goal should be to elevate the public's expectation.

**9. Importance of principle in political discussion--** Principles or values are all too often misunderstood in political discussions. Public policy has a meaningful impact on people and, all too often, candidates see public policy as simply a device to gain votes. Politics cannot be a chess game – it is too meaningful in terms of its effect on people.

**10. Restoring budget integrity--**He recalls one leader proclaimed that he'd not be a "green eye-shade governor". That is a shame, Carlson said, because we need an emphasis on a balanced budget, not a political budget. Budgets define our goals and expectations. The Republican Party needs leadership that will define the desired quality of life and indicate the methods to achieve it. There is too much focus on side issues ranging from abortion to guns to gambling, etc.

Jim H. commented that it's very difficult to find quality leadership today. John S. encouraged Carlson to continue to share his concerns about a balanced budget with any audiences. Chuck said maybe the Caucus needs to return to look at the budget-related data we had discussed several months ago.

**C. Thanks--**Verne thanked Carlson for meeting with us. A summary of today's meeting will be given to Carlson before it is submitted to our electronic list of 150 persons.