

Summary of Meeting Internal **Discussion on Campaign for Governor**

Civic Caucus Discussion on Campaign for Governor

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Friday, August 7, 2009

Present: Verne C. Johnson, chair; Janis Clay (by phone), Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland (by phone), Jan Hively, Dan Loritz, Tim McDonald, John Mooty, and Wayne Popham (by phone)

A. Context of the meeting--The Civic Caucus is scheduling several meetings this summer to determine what approach it might take in stimulating an enlightened debate on Minnesota's future by candidates for Governor and Legislature.

B. Proposal for a Leadership Council--The group first reviewed a proposal made at the end of last week's meeting by John Sampson, a long-time participant in the Civic Caucus. A complete copy of his proposal is available on request from civiccaucus@comcast.net. Highlights of Sampson's proposal:

1. Minnesota has lost its traditional edge as a state that the rest of the country looked to as being on the cutting edge of how to govern effectively--To support this contention, Sampson said that Democrats and Republicans worked together to achieve consensus during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. As a result of working together, he said, Minnesota provided leadership in strengthening education, broadening health care, and greatly improving highways outstate and in the metropolitan area.

2. During the last decade or so, Minnesota's position of national leadership has begun to fade--The Governor and both parties in the Legislature have become more polarized in their positions, he said, in part due to strongly held positions of many groups with vested interests to whom candidates look for funding their campaigns and gaining voter support.

3. The 2010 gubernatorial race could become a watershed election for our State--Minnesota could continue its recent approach of short-term fixes, he said, or nominees of its three parties could be committed to bold leadership to address key issues, so that Minnesota returns to its former position of being a cutting edge state in solving problems for its citizens.

4. This fall the Civic Caucus should invite key former political leaders of the state to form a Leadership Council--He suggested that a group of perhaps 12-18 persons, with equal representation of veteran Democrats and Republicans and a few Independents, would be asked to put forth a statement on key issues that need to be addressed by all candidates.

C. Discussion--During discussion of Sampson's proposal and other matters the following points were raised:

1. Attach first priority to the kind of leadership the state needs at this time--We agreed that Sampson's proposal does an excellent job of promoting the opportunity of the campaign to highlight consensus-producing leadership. We agreed our first task is to attempt to be as specific as possible about what is meant by new leadership.

2. Taking an historical perspective--One member cited an historical analysis that pointed out that Minnesota might now be drifting following a heyday of progress from the 1950s through the 1990s. Such a situation echoes the state's experience in the 1930s-1940s that followed great progress in the 1880s-1920s. The historical analysis was originally stated by civic thinker Ted Kolderie in a talk titled Cold Sunbelt. A copy of his talk is available on request to civiccaucus@comcast.net.

3. Key characteristics during good times--During the 1950s-1990s Minnesota was characterized as high tech, high service, highly entrepreneurial, and high tax, a member said. Civic leadership was strong; political parties worked together on solutions; Minnesota produced a national impact greater than its size (2 percent of the nation's population). But, the member said, we can't go back there. The key question today must be "What do we want to be now?" The member said that current conditions require Minnesota to continue to strive to be high tech, high service, and highly entrepreneurial, without being high tax. Asked why not high tax, the member replied that states now can compete globally. We need to work on what is possible with a reasonable tax rate.

4. Focus on our aspirations--In light of current realities, a member suggested the state needs to continue to focus on being a brainpower state with its leadership stressing that to which we aspire. An easy-to-understand statement like "Great Society" or "Morning in America" is needed, the member said.

5. Leadership needed from "can't run" institutions--A member noted that Kolderie has pointed out that new leadership is needed from the state's institutions that must be located here. Formerly, that group included major businesses, but we've learned in the last 20 years or so that few of our major businesses still have their headquarters here. Today our "can't run" institutions that are maintaining our quality of life are more the locally-based foundations, our colleges and universities, and noted arts organizations.

6. Population growth has not been a problem--Demographic data indicate that Minnesota has continued to grow its population significantly, a member said.

7. Generating good ideas still is urgent--Minnesota's leadership among states in generating good ideas still is urgent, and--as evidenced by "new schools" legislation in 2009--new ideas still are emerging, a member said. Another member cited the state's previous willingness to try new things, as evidenced by HMOs, tax-base sharing, Metropolitan Council and state aids to schools and local governments. These comments prompted another member to ask what can be done to promote more good ideas for people to chew on.

8. Too much reliance on elective office as a career?--A member wondered whether Minnesota's highly partisan political environment that has resulted in excessive polarization might be the product of an elections system that tends to reward and promote long-time career politicians, rather than individuals who assume public office only for a short time, after which they return to their non-political jobs.

Referring to an early discussion today on new ideas, the member said that elected professional politicians are looking chiefly to avoid alienating their political base of interest groups and party activists. Thus these officials aren't likely to be terribly receptive to new ideas for change.

9. Face reality on how to be competitive--We need to face reality, one member said, that Minnesota is a small state with higher costs of services, without the climate-related advantages of sunbelt states. Its business sector has been concentrating on how to reduce costs. Maybe the governmental sector needs to do the same to be competitive. Perhaps, the member suggested, we should explore more linkages with other states, maybe even finding an extension of Minnesota on the Gulf Coast.

10. Look to what the state was doing during its heyday--As we struggle with what to do now, a member said, why don't we look back and determine what it was that gave the state its strengths in the past. Then we can ask what needs to be done now. Another member replied that more attention was given to governmental reform, an area that urgently needs attention now, what with a proliferation of overlapping levels and numbers of governments.

11, Don't overlook real accomplishments at the citizen level--Minnesota continues to lead the nation in voter participation in elections, a member noted. We continue to have high graduation rates and an open system that encourages broad citizen participation.

12. Don't export dollars unnecessarily to Washington--A member recalled that Minnesota in the past has attempted to relate its tax policy to federal laws that allow federal deductibility of state taxes on income and property and even to some extent on sales taxes.

13. Characteristics of a new direction for the state--Minnesotans have prided themselves in the past on building consensus on public issues and crafting solutions that

promote the greater good, not personal self-enrichment. Maybe we're one of the few places left where such improvement still is possible. Reference was made to a quote by holocaust-survivor Viktor E. Frankl, placed at the bottom of today's agenda:

"Don't aim at success...the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued, it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one's dedication to a cause greater than oneself...or as a byproduct of one's surrender to a person other than oneself..."

14. Are we losing our sense that Minnesota is part of a republic?--We've seen the results of participative democracy in California, where seemingly anything can be submitted to referendum and where elected officials have ever-declining influence over the state's budget, a member said. Minnesota has begun to go down this road, too, by twice removing a measure of legislative control over taxation-spending in recent years.

15. Keep our emphasis on civility and search for the truth--Public policy discussions in other states sometimes reveal a lack of respect for civility and letting outright lies in the public debate go unchallenged, a member said.

16. Don't forget the importance of leadership in the civic sector--With all our emphasis on leadership by elected officials, we shouldn't forget that much past success in Minnesota was the result of the emergence of civic leaders who were pushing for change, a member said. Elected officials need the push from the outside.

D. Next steps considered--The group spent some brief moments toward the end of the meeting considering what should be done next.

1. What is expected of candidates during the campaign?--It was noted that the Civic Caucus could outline a statement on Minnesota's future and/or advance principles calculated to stimulate constructive state-wide debate during the upcoming campaign.

2. Asking the right questions--Rather than providing answers, might we be better advised to highlight the right questions to ask, a member inquired.

3. Recognize that the tax question will be front and center--Whatever we do, a member noted, we must recognize that Minnesota--facing what might be a \$7 billion-plus budget shortfall in 2011--has an enormous tax problem. Will state taxes be left alone? Restructured? Increased? Reduced?

4. How to communicate key messages to candidates--Returning briefly to the Sampson proposal discussed early in the meeting, it was noted that we could advocate that one prestigious group be set up to suggest what candidates ought to be addressing. Or we could advocate that groups of all types in all locations throughout the state ought to be taking the initiative in outlining their visions for the future of the state and communicating those visions to the candidates.

With respect to the Civic Caucus itself, we'll be continuing our regular weekly interviews with public figures--giving particular emphasis this fall to well-informed individuals whose thoughts can be very helpful to candidates. Civic Caucus visits with candidates can occur later.

We'll discuss further in two weeks what kind of statement on the issues we might consider at this time. In the meantime one or more members will be putting possible drafts together.

5. Explore Citizens League interest in the campaign--There's a possibility that we might have another meeting with the Citizens League concerning cooperation between the two organizations, although any kind of structural relationship seems most unlikely. If another meeting occurs, it was suggested we could invite the Citizens League to play a role in the campaign, such as promoting widespread citizen participation in the February precinct caucuses.