

Summary of Meeting with Tarryl Clark

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437
Thursday, June 21, 2007

Guest speaker: State Senator Tarryl Clark, St. Cloud, MN, assistant majority leader, Minnesota Senate

Present: Verne Johnson, chair; Chuck Clay, and Paul Gilje

A. Context of the meeting--After having discussed for many months various possible changes in state election laws, the Civic Caucus today met with a leader of the Minnesota State Senate to receive some legislative input on election issues.

B. Welcome and introduction--Verne and Paul welcomed and introduced State Sen. Tarryl Clark. Clark represents the St. Cloud area. She was first elected in a special election on December 27, 2005. Clark is assistant majority leader of the Senate and served as a leading Senate majority spokesperson during the 2007 Session. She is a lawyer and has served as executive director of the Minnesota Community Action Association, regional coordinator of the Northwest Area Foundation Devolution Project, and senior program associate with the Children's Defense Fund Minnesota. Prior to her election Clark had served in a variety of volunteer capacities in St. Cloud, including the Chamber of Commerce, DFL Party, and League of Women Voters.

C. Comments and discussion--During Clark's comments and in discussion with the Civic Caucus the following points were raised:

1. A long process in arriving at the Legislature--Ten years ago, Clark said, she never would have considered running for office. She was active in the community, helping teens and families. Sensing she could do more, she went to law school and then later she ran for the Legislature.

2. Retain precinct caucuses--Turning first to the question of the future of precinct caucuses, Clark acknowledged difficulties but said that they provide a good place for citizen involvement. While getting good participation is a real challenge, she's not a strong supporter of major changes. Clark said a lot of moderates show up at precinct caucuses in her district, although that might be because it is a swing district. She thinks precinct caucuses are getting better. A few years ago turnout was embarrassingly low. In the last two cycles, however, many more people have been showing up, including newer people.

3. Let primary elections determine the endorsement? --Clark referred to our session two weeks ago with Barry Casselman, who urged that political parties do away with a precinct-caucus-based endorsement process, and let primary election determine parties' endorsees. A former resident of Arizona, Clark recalled an election there where only five percent of the voters showed up for the primary election and the winner in a three-way race was not worthy of any party's endorsement.

Clark also said that if party endorsement occurs after the primary election, people won't show up at caucuses or the conventions.

4. Advance the date of the primary --Clark favors advancing the date of the primary, now in early September.

5. Examine a wide-open primary --To get all ideas on the table, Clark suggested we could look at a primary election in which all candidates of all parties run against one another, with the top two candidates of whatever party, or even the same party, squaring off in the general election.

6. Support for instant runoff voting (IRV) --Clark said she supports instant runoff voting, where voters rank candidates in the order of preference, as a way to assure a majority of all votes for the winner. She said the Legislature didn't pass an IRV bill in 2007 because it was known that the Governor was opposed.

7. Evaluate possible changes in redistricting --Clark said she is aware that former Governor Carlson and former vice-president Mondale are participating in a bipartisan effort to change the redistricting process. She also has looked briefly at the Iowa system. She acknowledged that the objective of creating competitive districts is an issue in setting up a new process, but she cautioned that the demographics of a state like Minnesota make it almost impossible to create competitive districts everywhere.

8. Support for changing judicial selection --Clark believes that Minnesota ought to change its system for selecting judges. Because Minnesota is a populist state, Clark doesn't believe that the people are ready to do away with elections totally, so the recommendations of the commission headed by former Governor Quie should be seriously considered. The Quie commission recommends initial merit-based appointment with periodic elections where the only choice is whether a judge should be retained or not. There would not be an election contest for judge.

9. Possible action on constitutional amendments in 2008 --Clark said "a small number" of constitutional amendments will likely be proposed by the Legislature in 2008. An amendment dedicating sales tax revenues to water resources and to the arts is near passage. An amendment on changing the system of judicial selection is possible, she said. Another possibility is an amendment on instant runoff voting.

10. Potential of "opening the flood gates" --Clark was asked whether the water-arts amendment won't prompt others, including education, to seek similar revenue protection via the constitution. Clark replied that the water-arts situation is different, in that the political situation has been polarized for so long and that the only way to get the revenues is via a constitutional amendment. Clark said as a general rule she doesn't support initiative and referendum. She acknowledged that others are interested, including for example, the people pushing for an amendment for the right to health care.

11. Reducing legislative influence in appropriating constitutionally-dedicated funds --In discussion with Clark it was noted that another issue is present, which is how constitutionally-dedicated funds are appropriated. Proposed legislation for a constitutional amendment also appears to give increasing influence to non-elected interest groups in the appropriation of dedicated funds, rather than leaving that role exclusively to the directly-elected Governor and Legislature.

12. Impact of campaign finance on polarization --Verne noted that David Schultz last week attributed legislative impasse to the very large amounts of campaign

money that are flowing to both sides. Because of the strong positions held by donors on either side, legislators seem unable to compromise, according to Schultz

Clark said that Minnesota was a leader in campaign finance changes in years past. She cited the ability of small contributors to receive rebates from the state, the check-off on income tax forms, and restrictions on hard money contributions as examples of good legislation.

She said that in some cases the large amounts of independent expenditures aren't welcomed by the candidates themselves. She disagreed that legislative caucuses are now running local campaigns. The parties offer field workers but the local districts still are in control. She thinks more could be done to encourage local political units to build on their skills.

13. Role of the media in public affairs --Legislators are finding it increasingly difficult to get their message out as the mainstream media reduce their public affairs coverage, Clark said. The Governor can command a good deal of attention, but legislators don't get that kind of attention, she said. Acknowledging the growing role of internet outlets, Clark said she's unsure the extent that legislators themselves utilize the internet for news. Certainly, blogs get legislators' attention, but she doesn't know how much legislators turn to the internet for hard news. Clark said she relies heavily on radio and newspapers.

14. Relationship of taxation controversies to issue of polarization --Asked about recent controversy between the Republican Governor and the DFL Legislature on tax policy, Clark disputed assertions that majority legislators pushed for tax increases that were known in advance to be unacceptable. She said a great deal of bipartisanship exists in the Legislature. For example, she said the position of Senate pro tem is assigned to a Republican. Further, Senate rules now give greater assurance of floor debate on bills that clear committee. The Senate can't control what goes on in the House, she said.

15. Thanks. On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne thanked Clark for meeting with us today.