

Summary of Meeting with Scotty Dibble and Geoff Michel

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Friday, February 17, 2006

Guests: State Senator Scott Dibble and State Senator Geoff Michel

Present: Verne C. Johnson, chair; Charles H. Clay, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland, John Mooty (by phone), Jim Olson (by phone), Clarence Shallbetter (by phone)

1. Introduction of our guests--Verne introduced Sen. Michel, Edina Republican, and Sen. Dibble, Minneapolis Democrat. Both are members of the 2020 caucus in the Minnesota Legislature.

2. Explanation of the 2020 Caucus--Michel and Dibble outlined the role of the 2020 Legislative Caucus, a bipartisan effort to help the state anticipate and address key problems facing the state in the future. The name "2020" identifies the year when Minnesotans over age 65 will outnumber school-aged children 5 to 17.

No one is content with our health care system, Michel said, and we don't have proposed solutions, even though the magnitude of the problem is expected to become much worse than today.

Michel credits Eric Shubert of the Citizens League as the catalyst for establishing the 2020 caucus. Shubert knew both Michel and Rep. Joe Atkins. He encouraged Michel to get together and visit. That meeting led to the caucus' formation.

Currently, the 2020 caucus is concentrating on giving attention to problems and educating legislators. This past week the group held a meeting on the growing problem of pensions.

About 25-30 persons are part of the 2020 caucus now, and more members are being welcomed. There's no test for membership, Michel said.

Dibble said that when he came to the Legislature he was surprised how so much of the visible legislative activity was for "show". He was disappointed about how little time was available for substantive shaping of issues. Everything was a partisan circus, all for show, looking to the next election. The 2020 caucus gives a legislator an opportunity outside a floor session to relax with colleagues on both sides of the aisle and seek agreement on a common set of facts. It's an effort to create an environment where legislators can work with one another and not expect that any word that comes from their mouths would be exploited by someone on the other side.

Michel said the 2020 caucus does not currently have a specific agenda. That may come

after additional meetings and conversation. Its short term goals are to grow the caucus, educate its participants, reach out to experts in the field, and get these 2020 issues into the 2006 campaign debate. The 2020 caucus is mainly interested in bringing people together so they can learn and talk. In response to a question, neither feels that their future leadership potential in their respective political caucuses is jeopardized by their participation in the 2020 group. They haven't sensed antagonism from current legislative leadership for their activity. Some suspicion exists that the group has a secret agenda.

3. Discussion with Michel and Dibble--During the discussion the following points were raised:

a. Future of precinct caucuses--Despite their problems, the precinct caucuses--scheduled this year on March 7--play an important role, despite criticism of single-issue voting, and should be continued, Dibble said. Asked how they might be improved, Dibble bemoaned the state of civic education in schools. When he meets with school children he is astounded how few of them are even aware of the existence of the caucuses. He said teachers aren't giving them the background they need. He agreed some changes need to be made in the endorsement process.

Michel said he advocates doing away with the precinct caucuses. So many precinct caucuses now are a sham. They turn off people because the people have a feeling everything has already been decided. Asked about improving the caucuses, instead of abolishing them, Michel said he doesn't see that as a realistic process. He likes some form of multi-candidate endorsement. Michel and Dibble favor a June primary.

John M. commented that party endorsement seemed to mean so much more in previous years. Endorsement meant a whole cadre of workers would be available to help.

b. Primary preceding endorsement?--Dibble said perhaps, but what underlies everything here is how people connected to one another. He's not convinced any tinkering with the voting process itself will do much. Verne J. commented that the work of the Civic Caucus is built around using new technology to help people be connected with one another. Bringing people to meetings isn't doing the job. We in the Civic Caucus are keeping about 150 people involved strictly through electronic communication.

c. Instant runoff voting--Michel said he's not impressed with such an option. He believes strongly in the two-party system and believes that the instant runoff approach would weaken the two-party system.

Dibble said he supports the effort now under way in Minneapolis to make instant runoff voting a part of the system of electing candidates to the Minneapolis city council. A group now is working to get a charter amendment on the ballot for instant runoff voting. He said voters like the idea, because they can support a candidate who might not have widespread backing and still play a role in the election of the likely winners. Moreover, he said, the process requires candidates themselves to conduct a campaign with attention to broad issues facing the city, not just a single issue favored by some. Verne

J. mentioned that instant runoff voting is in use in Australia.

d. Benefits of third party candidates--Verne mentioned that despite what you think about Jesse Ventura and his personal activities he brought a team of moderate assistants into his administration. That's an indication that an independent candidate can produce some benefits.

e. The growing role of legislative leadership in campaigns--Paul noted that political parties seem to have given way to the majority and minority leaders in the House and Senate on identifying and financing candidates and running campaigns. Michel and Dibble agreed this has occurred but didn't comment on whether this system is desirable or not. Paul also mentioned one idea for changing the dominant role of political parties. Under the idea, the parties would establish their platforms and then the candidates would select their party, based on the platforms, rather than the parties endorsing the candidates.

f. Changing role of political parties in campaigns--Michel noted that 10 to 30 years ago endorsement by the party meant much more than today. Formerly, the party gave you mailing lists, data bases and more, including money. Today a candidate doesn't need the party as much. Using new technology the candidate has direct access to mailing lists and data bases.

g. Look to public financing--Dibble said that if we are going to scrap endorsements and change the primary, then we need major change in campaign finance. He said we could do well to look to Arizona's example. In that state candidates can participate voluntarily in a system that gives them access to public funds, if they forego private contributions. Some matching funds also are available if privately-financed candidates outspend candidates receiving public funds.

h. Status of our representative democracy--Asked generally about the status of our representative democracy, Dibble said that the elections system is under threat because too many people don't feel they have basic access to the polls. Moreover, they are suspicious whether their votes will count or not. He is worried about erosion of civil liberties and lack of economic opportunity for many people.

Michel said he's had a chance to work both in Washington (with then-Rep. Frenzel) and in St. Paul. As a Republican he's very concerned with what is coming out of Washington, D. C., today. Congressmen are not serving as good role models for their state legislative counterparts.

i. Transportation funding in Minnesota--Nearing the end of the meeting, the conversation went to the possibility of a constitutional amendment in Minnesota that would dedicate a portion of sales tax receipts to transportation. Jim H. asked whether such a move is consistent with the idea of giving legislators broad access to revenue sources in making budget choices. Michel and Dibble said they are on record supporting the proposed constitutional amendment. Michel said that if we had to do it over we

probably wouldn't dedicate gasoline taxes to transportation, but that decision has been made. He sees the sales tax amendment as a continuation of the existing policy, even though, philosophically, he doesn't favor dedicated funds.

4. Thanks--Verne thanked Dibble and Michel for meeting with us. Verne said he hopes they will be open to changes in the electoral process, not just making it possible for legislators to have more conversations with one another. He said that we'll send the two of them the summary of today's meeting and invite changes before we distribute the summary to our electronic participants next Wednesday.