

Summary of Meeting with Don Fraser

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Thursday, January 24, 2008

Guest Speaker: Don Fraser, former mayor of Minneapolis, former member of Congress, former member of the Minnesota State Senate

Present: Verne C. Johnson, chair; Bill Frenzel (by phone), Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland, Jim Olson (by phone), and Wayne Popham (by phone)

A. Context of the meeting—Speakers before the Civic Caucus have discussed the pros and cons of precinct caucuses, biennial, grass-roots meetings that political parties hold at the precinct level, the first step in the process of selecting delegates to conventions and endorsing candidates for office. Don Fraser was invited today to discuss his thoughts about precinct caucuses.

B. Welcome and introduction--Verne and Paul welcomed Fraser, a native of Minneapolis, graduate of the University of Minnesota and its School of Law, who served in the State Senate from 1954 to 1962, in Congress from 1963-1979, and as mayor Minneapolis from 1980 to 1993.

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

1. Precinct caucuses make it possible for candidates with limited financial resources to get noticed--Fraser likes precinct caucuses because they provide an opportunity for people without a lot of money to run for office. Someone can gain support by making contact with likely attendees in advance of the precinct caucuses. The precinct caucuses then can provide a springboard for any candidate, with or without initial financial backing, to become a legitimate contender. Without precinct caucuses and with only the primary election, candidates will need to raise a great deal of money up front simply to get recognized. Fraser also likes the fact that precinct caucuses offer some way for a pre-examination of candidates and issues. Just throwing candidates and issues into the public sphere doesn't offer as much in testing their legitimacy as does the precinct caucus, he said.

2. Concern over how precinct caucuses are conducted--Fraser doesn't like that many sub-caucuses are held within the framework of a DFL precinct caucus. People divide into sub-caucuses based on support for issues or candidates and are able to pick their own delegates within each sub-caucus, he said. That process denies any opportunity for all the precinct caucus members to speak, listen (and maybe learn) from each other. When they separate into groups they are talking to themselves. He noted that Minnesota borrowed from the sub-caucus concept that exists in Iowa, but used

there only for selecting a nominee for President. In the Iowa caucuses, supporters must make a minimum showing of support for a candidate for their votes to be counted, he noted.

In a DFL precinct caucus in Minnesota, everyone can vote for a presidential candidate at the beginning, but then, to Fraser's dissatisfaction, many of them divide into sub-caucuses for the election of delegates.

3. Ways to improve precinct caucuses--Fraser was asked how precinct caucuses could be improved. Members of the Civic Caucus questioned whether precinct caucuses still are appropriate today, when people have so many conflicts with other responsibilities and where it is difficult to attend meetings. It was also noted that many persons attending precinct caucuses represent special interests, and, therefore, average voters--who don't have strong views on any one issue or candidate--don't feel welcome. The result, it was noted, is poor attendance at many precinct caucuses.

Fraser replied that procedures might be simplified in precinct caucuses. Leaders might do a better job of getting information out to potential attendees in advance, to make the meeting more attractive to a broad group of voters and not be dominated by a few people. It is good, he said, to get all kinds of resolutions offered. In response to a question Fraser said that today union members make up about roughly 15 percent of the labor force in the United States. Years ago unions represented about 35 percent of the workforce. So they are not as dominant as in past years.

He agreed that many people don't show up, but they just don't care that much, he said.

4. Reaching people who don't attend meetings--A Civic Caucus member noted that the Civic Caucus itself is using a system of education and involvement that doesn't require people to attend meetings. A core group conducts interviews but the larger group is involved electronically and is able to learn, make suggestions, and be part of final recommendations without having to come to a meeting. Fraser replied that there might be ways whereby precinct caucuses could adapt themselves to the internet. He sees real potential for using the internet to provide a much broader group with exposure to the issues than is possible in a precinct caucus.

5. Party pressure not to file against endorsed candidates--A Civic Caucus member noted that political parties try to discourage other candidates from running against endorsed candidates in primary elections, even though endorsed candidates emerge from the precinct caucus process, with its somewhat questionable representation of broader segments of the population. Fraser said that endorsed candidates, at least in the DFL, are usually pretty representative of the party as a whole.

6. Are precinct caucuses more of a problem for Republicans than Democrats?--Fraser said it appears that Republicans are more saddled with domination by special interest groups in their precinct caucuses than are Democrats. Perhaps the solution is for moderate Republicans to start organizing.

7. Should the candidates select the party, rather than the party select the candidates?--Fraser was asked about a possible change in which the political parties would adopt their platforms, after which candidates would file for office, pledging fidelity to the platform of the party they choose. Then voters in that party's primary would select the candidate who seems best able to implement the party platform.

Fraser said that candidates need more flexibility in taking positions and shouldn't be locked into all of the positions taken by their political parties.

8. Question of multiple endorsements by political parties--Fraser isn't excited about the idea of a party convention endorsing more than one candidate, based on some threshold of delegate support. Party campaign funds are so limited, he said. They need to be focused on one endorsee.

9. Change date of primary election--Fraser supports moving the date of the primary forward. A September primary leaves so little time for the campaign among nominated candidates.

10. Opposition to a presidential primary in Minnesota--Fraser doesn't like presidential primaries. He wouldn't want Minnesota to have one. He is disturbed that the outcome of presidential primaries in one state has such a large effect on the outcomes in subsequent states' primaries--just because of the headlines. Just let the parties in each state elect their own delegates to the national party conventions to make the endorsement decision, he said. He thought that having a few primaries in the United States wasn't a problem.

11. Ranking candidates in order of preference at precinct caucuses--In response to a question, Fraser said he doesn't know if DFL party rules will allow individual precinct caucuses to invite attendees to rank candidates in order of preference, or if attendees will only be allowed to select their first choice. That was an option once, but he wasn't sure what the rules provided now. He said he personally likes the idea of ranking candidates along the lines of Instant Runoff Voting (IRV).

12. Change system for selecting judges--Fraser favors the recommendations of the Quie commission that judges be appointed initially but then stand for a "yes-no" retention election at the conclusion of their terms. He said that rulings by the U. S. Supreme Court no longer allow any restraint on campaigning by judges, which threatens a non-partisan judiciary.

13. Change the system for redistricting--Fraser likes the idea put forth by the Mondale-Carlson committee at the Humphrey Institute to set up a commission of retired judges that would draw boundaries of congressional and legislative districts, while preserving a potential role for the Legislature in the event of impasse.

Asked about whether creating competitive districts should be a criterion for drawing

district boundaries, Fraser said he hasn't favored the "sweetheart" arrangements that lawmakers on both sides of the aisle have made--to protect the advantage each side has in certain districts. However, he thinks it would be difficult to write effective language into a bill to require competitiveness.

14. Influence of money on elections is "troubling"--Fraser said he wishes there were a way to reduce the impact of moneyed interests in campaigns, perhaps via more public financing. Some Civic Caucus members noted that legislative caucuses (the organizations of the majority and minority in the State House and State Senate) are heavily involved in financing campaigns now and are generously funded by contributions from organizations with special interests in the outcome of legislation.

15. Too much influence from ideological positions--Looking at the overall political environment, Fraser said he is troubled by the extent to which people seem to take positions on some issues as if the positions were ideological or matters of faith, rather than being the results of rational discussion. He cited global warming as an example.

16. Loss of collegiality--The Tuesday-Thursday congressional schedule, with members of Congress no longer residing in Washington, D. C., makes it very difficult for lawmakers of different political views to get to know one another. Fraser said that when he served in Congress he had very close relationships with Republicans as well as Democrats.

17. Reducing polarization and paralysis--Fraser agreed that leadership must be restored so that the state can attack problems effectively. A modification by Republicans on their positions on tax matters would help produce consensus, he said.

18. Urgent need for action on transportation--Fraser said he agrees with a Civic Caucus member's assessment that the transportation issue in Minnesota suffers because credible leadership by one state (planning) entity, containing recommendations for both highways and transit, and covering city, county, and state highways, has not been forthcoming. The state seems committed to perpetuating a highway-transit division through existing and proposed structural and financing methods and, thereby, making it almost impossible to set priorities among all options.

19. Thanks--On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne thanked Fraser for being with us today.