

Summary of Meeting with Bill Frenzel

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle #920, Bloomington, MN 55437

Friday, November 11, 2005

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

A. Presentation by Bill Frenzel--Frenzel served eight years in the Minnesota House and 20 years as a U.S. Congressman from Minnesota. Since 1991 he's been a scholar with the Brookings Institution. He holds several positions in international trade and on tax and spending issues. Verne read a summary of Frenzel's positions as listed in a biography found on the Internet.

Verne thanked Frenzel for his point-by-point response earlier this week to our position paper. Verne said that all core participants in the caucus have received copies of Frenzel's response.

In his comments and in discussion with the Caucus, Frenzel made the following points:

1. His review of materials--Frenzel said he has read our position paper on the status of America's democracy and has read the summaries of our sessions with our six previous resource persons. He said that some of what we consider to be serious he believes are not that bad and some other concerns are worse than we indicate.

2. Bigger problems for moderates in political parties today--Moderates always had difficulty in parties but today polarization has increased so that the parties today are effectively administered by their core constituencies on the right and the left. Thus, those groups drive the caucuses and the primary. Consequently, it becomes very difficult for a moderate candidate to make much progress. Until the mid-1980s, moderates had some chance, but not now. Frenzel recalled his role as one of three incorporators of a Colin Powell for President committee. Powell withdrew for family concerns but it would have been a real struggle for a moderate. Today there's a possibility that someone like John McCain could get the nod.

Frenzel said he doesn't know if people are turned off to political participation because of the parties' exclusiveness. Voter turnout is the best way to measure any degree of public apathy, and he believes that voter turnout is cyclical. One problem today is that if parents won't vote, the kids aren't likely to vote either.

3. Political campaigns today have degenerated--Frenzel is a Virginia resident now, where a campaign for governor just wrapped up with an expense of about \$50 million. Until last Monday night he hadn't seen any ads where candidates said anything about themselves or what they stand for. Frenzel voted for a former Republican who ran as an Independent and got 2 percent of the vote. The two top candidates' ads simply were efforts to reveal bad things about the other candidate.

4. Changes in how campaigns are conducted--In the old days there were lots of volunteers participating. Their participation had a "purifying" effect, because they campaign leaders knew that campaign workers didn't want to participate only in negative campaigning. Today far fewer volunteers are participating. Women are working; kids aren't interested. So you hire people to run your campaigns. They

come into the state and can insult the other side all they want. Regrettably, negative campaigning works. Years ago he recalls that negative ads didn't work well.

5. Are problems serious?--Verne interrupted Frenzel to inquire whether the problems with our democracy are serious or not. Frenzel said he goes to the Capitol maybe two times a month. It's a poisonous atmosphere. Everyone is saying bad things about the other side. He recalls that members of Congress and their families used to get together across party lines at retreats. That doesn't happen now. All they can think about is the bad people on the other side.

6. Financial status of the country is Frenzel's No. 1 issue--Frenzel said he agrees with John Gunyou that the biggest crisis is financial. He said that the financial problem has a life of its own; he doesn't see that it's related to the problems with the democracy that we have been discussing. He doesn't know when the elected officials ran a respectable fiscal ship in Washington. The deficit disappeared under Clinton, but he got lucky. He's not only alarmed with the fiscal situation in Washington, he's terrified. He said that federal spending as a percent of gross domestic product is about 20-21 percent now, and it will be growing to the high 20s, just by entitlements. He's a big supporter of a balanced budget amendment and a line item veto for the President.

The Republicans emulate the Democrats by spending in order to get elected and then let someone else--our progeny--pay for it.

7. Changes in election laws--He's seen our interest in instant runoff voting, but he doesn't like such gimmicks. His experiences as a congressman were that gimmicks often produce unintended consequences that were worse than the reform they intended to accomplish. Verne mentioned the example cited to us by Tim Penny that in a three-way race the voters who support the third candidate don't want to waste their votes on the loser, so they pick one of the other two. With instant runoff voting, people could still support their third candidate by indicating their first and second choices. Frenzel repeated his comment that such a change is a gimmick. Moreover, he thinks it would be confusing to voters.

8. Requiring changes in ground rules for political parties--Paul asked whether laws governing political parties might be changed, since the parties are privileged to be able to have their candidates on the ballot. Frenzel said that elected officials won't change a law that would hurt their own party. He said he now regrets voting for party designation in the Minnesota Legislature. He'd like to take that vote back.

9. Make term limits the first change--Frenzel repeated his advocacy of term limits, something on the order of allowing about 18-20 years. He also mentioned the caucus rules in Congress that limit the chair of a committee to three terms. A certain chair of Appropriations never would have been dislodged without that rule.

10. Changes in campaign finance--Frenzel doesn't like limitations on expenditures because they invariably hurt the challengers. He supports full disclosure as suggested by Tim Penny. He'd require full disclosure for contributors to 527 committees. Such contributors now can give unlimited amounts anonymously. He would not get rid of political action committees (PACs). He favors modifying the rules relating to PACs so that the expenses of running the PACs come out of the contribution of the members.

The news media treat campaign finance as a horse race, simply obtaining the list of contributions and reporting how much each candidate has raised.

He's somewhat attracted by the idea of restricting contributions to the district where the contributor lives, but you'd immediately encounter problems with minorities who would contend that they couldn't raise sufficient funds in poor districts.

It's obvious by the low percentage of voters who exercise the check-off option on federal and state tax forms (around 2 percent) that the public is put off by the system.

He mentioned that a Governor's race in New Jersey produced something like \$80 million to \$90 million in expenditures. He wishes limits could be placed on the upper end.

11. Changes in elections--Frenzel said he believes the primary elections should occur earlier in Minnesota. He believes Minnesota should have a primary election for President. He favors regional primaries around the country, not a single date.

He said he would support handing over redistricting to a commission.

12. The bigger role played by the federal government today--Verne noted a tendency today for everything to be the responsibility of the federal government. A high percentage of the population is dependent upon the federal government for something. Is there a significant issue for the future of our democracy one of realigning the responsibilities of our federal, state and local governments? Frenzel replied that he recalls that Brandl mentioned that. Today, he said, lobbyists--and that includes the representatives of the care groups--want the power in Washington. They don't want to be lobbying 50 states. It makes it easier to work with only one place to go.

13. Effectiveness of being in the minority in Congress--Obviously, you're out of power, but an individual can be bolder, he said. He does not support increasing subpoena power for the minority. Congress isn't good at legislating, but it is 10 times worse at investigating.

14. Increasing role of the caucuses--Frenzel has been bothered by this since 1974, with the caucuses calling for closed roll calls and less debate. He still supports the filibuster in the Senate with its 60-vote requirement to shut off.

15. More civility needed--He wishes that our Senators and Representatives didn't attack each other personally and that they would argue civilly. He wishes for a little more comity. He recalled that when he first came to Congress his closest friends were one Republican and two Democrats.

16. Senate is as polarized as the House--Even without being gerrymandered, he believes the Senate today is as polarized as the House. A few people work together, for example the Republican and Democratic members of the "pork" committees, appropriations and transportation.

17. Put Sabo on the list--Frenzel suggested that Congressman Martin Sabo be included. He has been on both the majority and minority. He is just as good a legislator in both roles.

B. Thanks--Verne recalled the very warm relationship he has had with Frenzel for some 50 years. He said it was very good that we could be together again. He thanked Frenzel for his being willing to take time with us.