

Summary of Meeting with Ted Kolderie

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

Wednesday, February 22, 2006

Present: Verne C. Johnson, chair; Chuck Clay, Paul Gilje, Jim Olson (by phone), and Clarence Shallbetter

1. Introduction of Ted Kolderie--Verne introduced Kolderie, a senior associate with Educational Evolving in Minnesota, a cooperative project of the Center for Policy Studies and Hamline University. Kolderie is a founder of the charter school movement. He also served as Citizens League executive director from 1967 to 1980. Earlier he was a journalist with the Minneapolis Tribune.

2. Open remarks by Kolderie--In his comments Kolderie made the following points:

a. When reforms need reforming--Widespread agreement exists, he suspects, that the problems brought to the Civic Caucus' attention over the last several months are very real. It's interesting, he said, if you look at one, the matter of Congressional redistricting. If you look at maps of Congressional districts in many parts of the nation, you're outraged at their design. The concept of one-person-one-vote was made clear in Baker vs. Carr in 1962. But looking at Congressional districts today you have to wonder if the old axiom--every reform will be taken to excess and ultimately will need reform itself--doesn't apply very clearly in the voting system today.

What's the remedy? Kolderie wonders if perhaps we need someone again to make a constitutional challenge. The courts didn't want to get into redistricting around 1960, but sharp people put together a compelling case. Couldn't the best legal minds today come up with something that changes the way districting is occurring today?

b. Necessary conditions for action--He recalled what Elmer Andersen said in the 1970s, when asked about leadership. When the public is clear about a problem and is ready for action, elected officials are very important. In a period like the current one, when the public is unclear and unready, political people naturally hesitate. This suggests an alternative interpretation of the problem. Perhaps what we're seeing is simply politic behaving 'naturally', the way politics is built to behave. Perhaps in earlier years there were either 'conditions' -- in the world or in the nation or in the community -- that forced politics into greater bipartisanship or some kind of community pressure that forced politics to be more responsible about policy. Think about Senator Vandenberg working with FDR during World War II. In Minnesota there was certainly strong pressure on elected officials from the private sector to deal with real problems. So perhaps what's changed is that this outside pressure has gone away, allowing politics to revert to 'normal'. Clearly Minnesota has seen a dramatic deterioration in its private-sector public-affairs institutions. We should ask whether this might explain what's happening in politics, which we now tend to blame on politics.

c. In some cases political leaders have stepped out in front, even in the absence of widespread public awareness--He cited two cases. The first was education. Even by 1980 the public was convinced there was a problem, and that action needed to be taken. So when Minnesotans in the '80s approached the political leadership with proposals the elected officials were receptive. They acted, even without clear public support, against the opposition of powerful interest groups; on open enrollment, on chartered schools. It was the kind of courageous action we are looking for today. And it came, because the conditions and the consensus were right.

The second is fiscal policy. Most well-informed people are terribly concerned about the irresponsibility of congressional and administration action. But most Americans grew up in the postwar world; the half-century--as John Borchert said--of greatest increase in real output the world has ever known. In this new situation it was impossible to maintain the old ethic of self-denial. People felt, and not without reason, that they could have anything they wanted. Somebody else would pay for it. How can anyone look at the levels of private debt today and wonder why the public is unconcerned about the level of government debt or the size of the trade deficit?

d. In the past Minnesota leaders didn't just try to solve problems, but they took advantage of opportunities--When you think back to the major legislation adopted in Minnesota in the late 60s and early 70s, a remarkable set of institutions in the Twin Cities worked together to stimulate change in governmental organization and public finance.

e. Changing role of the newspapers--Kolderie recalled that the Twin Cities newspapers were very much a part of the changes that occurred in the 60s and 70s. They saw their role in reporting a sensible policy discussion. He's asked newspaper leaders today why they don't cover policy and has been told that "This is not what the public is interested in." It's just insider talk involving a few people, he's been told. Kolderie thinks the problem is much deeper than that. People today, as he noted earlier, are into self-fulfillment. Thus the papers report things that the reader is most interested in: (1) himself or herself, (2) their friends. Public affairs comes way down the list. The paper seems to be a collection of advice columns, even answering such questions as an owner's day-to-day problems with an animal pet.

We need to recognize newspaper economics, too, he said, and that the shift in readers' attitudes gave newspapers an excuse not to do what they no longer could afford to do.

Sports coverage, interestingly, is an anomaly. Remember, Kolderie said, that newspapers have no legal responsibility or license. They can cover what they choose to cover, and it doesn't do much good to lecture them about their responsibility.

3. Discussion--During the discussion with Kolderie the following points were raised:

a. An interest in policy "action" not policy development--Kolderie recently attended a meeting of private civic leaders who were joining to work together on selected public policy issues. All they cared about, he said, was action, not really paying attention to what the action was, or its basis in addressing a public policy problem. They said they were done studying and needed to act. They aren't interest in policy discussion.

Kolderie said that some people are calling for action on early childhood education, without concern for what the action is. For example, he said, one proposal is essentially to extend conventional K-12 education one or two years earlier, using the same system as now. The implications for class size and teacher compensation are enormous.

b. Turn to new places for policy leadership--In the past, Kolderie said, it was common that local institutions tied to the community, such as banks, newspapers, and utilities, to be turned to for leadership because they would always need to be headquartered locally. That's all changed, he said. Our banks, newspapers and utilities are all owned by firms located elsewhere. Consequently, he said, we need to look to other local institutions, such as our University of Minnesota, community foundations, and the arts and culture community.

c. Develop proposals and build consensus for change--Groups who want to accomplish change need, of course, compelling ideas. But as critical is the need to develop the coalitions of support. Asked which issues might be best suited for bringing about both good proposals and a consensus for change, Kolderie

replied that redistricting might be a good candidate. Others noted that part of the gerrymandering issue relates to designing districts to fulfill civil rights requirements. Another possible issue, Kolderie said, is campaign finance, although every effort to contain the money seems to be thwarted by another way to channel the money.

d. People seeking more from the public treasury--Kolderie was asked about the possibility that democracy is threatened when so many people demand a share of the public treasury that budgets no longer can be balanced. He referred the group to a 2003 book by Daniel Usher: *The Economic Prerequisite to Democracy*. Usher's concern is what happens to a democracy when more than half its people have their income politically determined.

e. Don't under-rate Minnesota legislators--Kolderie stressed that he has high regard for leaders in the Minnesota Legislature. He singled out Steve Kelley, Larry Pogemiller, Barb Sykora, Alice Seagren, and Mindi Greiling. They know how to carry their responsibility.

f. Proposals he would make to the Caucus-- I see this question asked of others; some of whom are recorded as having had no real proposals to offer . . . as I assume they didn't. I'm saying that to be effective--which I assume is important here--just having proposals for change isn't enough. For something really to happen the conditions need to be right and the consensus needs to be present. So the CC needs a two-part strategy: developing action-recommendations and developing the consensus. We can't do anything about 'the conditions'. We just have to wait and hope these develop.

Unhappily, in the situation we have today we lack effective mechanisms to build the needed consensus. These mechanisms will have to be developed. I see a long, slow job of institution-building. It took this town a generation to build the institutions that generated the political/governmental performance we had by the 1970s, and the reputation that came with that. It will be especially hard because we'll have to start over with a new concept of civic leadership and with new mechanisms and processes for the discussion of problems and solutions.

I'm afraid we're looking at 20 years of hard work to build back what we've lost here in Minnesota. How to do that is the subject of another discussion; is the 'other half' of the agenda for the CC, since--again--that outside consensus, outside pressure, will be necessary to get the political system to make the changes it basically doesn't want to make.

4. Thanks--Verne thanked Kolderie for meeting with us today.