

Summary of Meeting with Martin Sabo and Bill Frenzel

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Tuesday, April 22, 2008

Guest speakers: **Bill Frenzel**, Republican, and **Martin Sabo**, Democrat, former members of Congress and former members of the Minnesota Legislature from the Twin Cities area

Present: Verne Johnson, chair; Chuck Clay, Deb Frenzel, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland (by phone), and Jim Olson (by phone)

A. Context of the meeting--During their service in Washington, D.C., and in St. Paul, Sabo and Frenzel were involved in most of the issues with which the Civic Caucus has been working over the last couple of years. Frenzel now resides in Washington, and Sabo, in Minneapolis, and both were available for a joint visit with the Civic Caucus

B. Welcome and introductions--Verne and Paul introduced Sabo and Frenzel, whose careers had similar patterns. Sabo was first elected to the Minnesota House in 1960 and served until 1978. He was elected to the U. S. House of Representatives in 1978 and served until his retirement in 2006. Frenzel was first elected to the Minnesota House in 1960 and served until 1970. He was elected to the U.S. House in 1970 and served until his retirement in 1990. Frenzel is a visiting scholar at the Brookings Institution, and Sabo, at Augsburg College. Although on opposite sides of the political fence, both worked closely in the late 1960s on important metropolitan legislation, including the Metropolitan Council and the metropolitan tax-base sharing law.

C. Comments and discussion--During their comments and in discussion with Frenzel and Sabo the following points were raised:

1. Opening comments by Sabo--Looking at his career in elected office, Sabo said (a) he would do it all over again, (b) he wouldn't trade his time in the Legislature for his time in Congress, and (c) it was possible to do so much more, and quicker, in the Legislature than in was in Congress.

He has witnessed major changes in both the Legislature and in Congress during his careers. When he started in the Legislature, things hadn't changed much since 1913. He was part of many legislative changes, including several bouts with redistricting, as well as several steps to modernize the Legislature, including staffing. In Congress he saw leadership become far more centralized. As a member of Congress he encountered much greater pressure as years went by to raise campaign finance dollars for the congressional leaders. A member of Congress can be assigned "dues" by the caucus to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars for the caucus. But the member can't accept a free lunch while touring a factory affiliated with some lobbyist. Sabo hasn't liked experience with the McCain-Feingold campaign reform act. He's always been skeptical of changes that would "reform", "reorganize" or "re-codify". Use of the prefix

"re-" signaled to him that advocates of change needed to resort to such over-arching words because their arguments were weak on the specifics.

Politics is mostly a personal business, he said, and you need to get to know your colleagues, of whatever party. Ethics changes have made it much more difficult to enjoy informal interchange.

Asked why he chose not to run for re-election in 2006, Sabo realized he wasn't enjoying the experience as much any more. Other Democrats who were elected with him in 1978 no longer were in the body.

Looking back on both his years in St. Paul and Washington, he singled out two very satisfying experiences, the Minnesota Miracle of 1971, when major revenue raising and distribution legislation was enacted, and his experience as chair of the U. S. House Budget Committee in 1993-1994.

2. Opening comments by Frenzel--He recalls great satisfaction with being part of new legislation that was enacted in the Minnesota Legislature in his first term, in 1963, when significant changes affecting Hennepin County's urbanization were enacted, with leadership by the Citizens League.

He recalls his early days in politics as being kinder and gentler. He's very nervous about rancor and animosity that he sees in both St. Paul and Washington today. Some of the concern relates to the influence of money in politics. Some of the concern relates to the media. There's been a change in the way the public looks at politics, which makes negative campaigning so successful, he said. Looking back to the turn of the 19th to the 20th centuries, one sees great negativity then, too, so Frenzel would like to think that the situation today is cyclical, but it does seem to him to be getting worse.

Frenzel specialized in international trade legislation while in the U.S. House, and cited that experience as most satisfying.

He's no fan of earmarking legislation but recalled one case where, in the minority, he went to Reps. Sabo and Oberstar to say that he'd vote for the appropriations bill if they would include the Bloomington Ferry bridge, which they did. President Reagan vetoed the bill and Frenzel said he had to vote to overturn the veto because of the pledge he'd made if his bridge were included. Frenzel said that was very embarrassing to him. He said he came from an affluent district and didn't need a lot of specific pieces of legislation for his district.

He enjoyed his time in Congress, he said, and found a good amount of bipartisan activity in subcommittees and full committees that didn't attract much publicity. He said he agrees with Sabo and considers the McCain-Feingold law "an unmitigated disaster". Much reform needs to be done on campaign finance, he said.

He has enjoyed his contacts with the Civic Caucus. It brings back a lot of good memories for him. Frenzel is serving as core participant on the Civic Caucus.

3. Redistricting of the U. S. House of Representatives--It was noted that the Civic Caucus has recommended that the Minnesota Legislature withdraw from playing a dominant role in redistricting of the Legislature and of the U.S. House districts in Minnesota. The role of the Legislature in redistricting U. S. House districts might not be fully appreciated.

It's not as if it's easier to divide the state into eight congressional districts than it is to divide the state into 134 legislative districts, they said. Frenzel recalled that in 1981 the Congressional delegation from Minnesota agreed on a redistricting plan and handed it to the Legislature. It has been very common for the congressional delegation to be as involved in protecting themselves as it has been for the members of the state Legislature.

Frenzel said he favors the Mondale-Carlson plan at the Humphrey Institute, despite concerns that retired judges might be just as subject to political pressures as anyone. Sabo is somewhat of a skeptic, wondering who will hire the staff that will support any redistricting panel.

4. Issues with party endorsement--In response to a question about using redistricting to create safe districts for incumbents and the likelihood that safe districts will produce candidates at the extremes of the political spectrum, Sabo said it is better to look at two different issues--the endorsement process and the nature of legislative redistricting--separately. He noted that two Democrats, Collin Peterson and Tim Walz, have been elected from districts in Minnesota that traditionally have been regarded as Republican districts.

A member of the Civic Caucus commented that the primary election seems to be more important than the general election in some so-called "safe" districts, which would seem to push candidates farther to the right or to the left.

5. Concern over strengthened role of legislative and congressional caucus leadership--A member of the Civic Caucus noted that fund-raising is increasingly concentrated in caucus leadership both in St. Paul and in Washington and that power over the fate of bills seems concentrated in the caucuses rather than the committees. Sabo replied that in the Minnesota Legislature the legislative caucuses are investing significant dollars in highly-contested races, but he said that the public financing still works well in 80 percent to 85 percent of the legislative races that aren't receiving heavy doses of funding from the caucuses. Sabo said that if outside groups are financing legislative races, he'd much rather have the money coming from the legislative caucuses than from advocacy groups. One need to be just as concerned, he said, about advocacy groups that have lots of money from small donors as well as those dependent upon big donors for support. In fact, advocacy groups with small donor support seem to be more inflexible and polarizing, he said.

The presence of advocacy groups isn't all that dissimilar to a time in the past when the Legislature was in the hands of a few industry lobbyists, Sabo said.

6. Be more open to using the primary elections--Sabo said he wishes that the parties were more willing to let contests go to the primary election, rather than insisting on one candidate being favored with endorsement. This is particularly relevant in a race like that of the U. S. Senate, where Sabo thinks that the Ceresi-Fanken battle could just as well have been settled in a primary.

Frenzel said he wishes the political parties would allow multiple endorsements.

7. Endorsement process not subject to change in law--Sabo noted that the political parties, not state law, govern the conduct of endorsements. Frenzel said that moving the primary date back from September would do more than anything else to prompt the parties to review their endorsement process.

8. Possibility of a presidential primary in Minnesota--It was noted that Republicans (because of an Eisenhower-Taft battle) and Democrats (because of a Kefauver-Stevenson battle) in the 1950s both supported discontinuing a presidential primary for Minnesota. Both Sabo and Frenzel said they support reinstatement of a presidential preference primary in Minnesota.

Sabo said he doesn't favor regional primaries, but he'd like all primaries in the nation to occur on, say, four different dates. Thus a mixture of states around the country would hold their primaries at the same time. Perhaps Minnesota could hold its primary the same date as Wisconsin, he suggested. Frenzel said he supports regional primaries.

9. Federal-state role in setting priorities on transportation--In response to a question Sabo said the vast majority of transportation funds come to the states via distribution formulas. Only a small portion of the funds are earmarked for specific projects, he said. Transit has more categorical programs because Congress specifies which metropolitan areas should be classified as "new starts" for rail transit.

A member said that it appears as if state and regional agencies go through a great deal of effort to satisfy federal requirements, as is the case with the Metropolitan Council in planning the Central Corridor light rail line between the two downtowns.

Another member said that it appears that state and regional jurisdictions initiate projects because of the availability of federal dollars.

Frenzel said he'd be happier if planning were done within the state.

10. New bipartisan effort on national transportation planning--It was noted that four former congressional leaders, George Mitchell, Howard Baker, Tom Daschle,

and Bob Dole, have formed a Bipartisan Policy Center to, as stated in its website, "to develop and promote solutions that would attract the public support and political momentum to achieve real progress."

A priority for the Bipartisan Policy Center is transportation, and Sabo is one of four co-chairs of a National Transportation Policy Project with a charge to "focus attention on appropriate priorities for national infrastructure funding and develop politically viable policies for transportation that surmount partisan and regional conflicts."

A specific area of inquiry, according to its website: "the changing nature of metropolitan mobility and inter-regional connectivity."

11. Transportation priority-setting in Minnesota--It was noted that the Civic Caucus has been looking at how several transportation-related jurisdictions at the federal, state, regional, county, and city level relate to one another. Sabo said the process is so complicated that he never fully understood it while in Congress.

Referring to a new joint powers transit board in the metropolitan area, Frenzel said he doesn't think counties should play such a dominant role relative to the Metropolitan Council. Sabo said that no governor since Wendy Anderson has really paid attention to the Metropolitan Council.

12. Future of the Civic Caucus--Asked about the future of the Civic Caucus, Frenzel said the organization needs to expand beyond its current number of 800 participants. Sabo asked whether the Civic Caucus is sufficiently focused on certain issues. In the discussion it was noted that the Civic Caucus is trying to concentrate more on issues of the structure of decision-making as contrasted with the substance of specific issues.

13. Thanks--On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne thanked Frenzel and Sabo for meeting with us today.