



Summary of Meeting with David Durenberger

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

Friday, November 4, 2005

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

A. Introduction of David Durenberger —The chair introduced Durenberger, who served as a U.S. Senator from 1978 to 1995. Earlier he had been chief of staff to Minnesota Governor Harold LeVander. Currently he is senior health policy fellow at the Graduate School of Business, University of St. Thomas. Durenberger is a recognized national expert on health care policy and finance. During his remarks and in the discussion with Caucus members the following points were made:

1. America's balancing moral values and the guarantee of popular sovereignty —Durenberger believes the separation of powers as provided in the U.S. Constitution, even in this crazy time of selecting Supreme Court judges, is serving well. Moreover, it is the press, the 4th estate, which really ensures success of our experiment with popular sovereignty, which is the difference between us and the rest of the world democracies.

While he was in the Senate he was confronted with a whole host of proposed constitutional amendments, but he said he rejected them all. Basically, our constitutional system is in good shape, and while he'd make some changes in our process, he'd not tamper with the constitution.

2. Two-party system should be preserved —It takes a celebrity factor, such as a Ventura, to intrude. But he is fundamentally satisfied with continuing to rely on our two-party system.

3. Shorten campaigns —Durenberger would like to limit the length of campaigns to eight weeks before the primary.

4. Strengthen the parties —While Durenberger is very dissatisfied with the current Republican Party, his party, he believes that it is essential to broaden the base of both parties. The Democrats can get away from the far left and the Republicans, the far right, in their fund raising.

5. The scandal of buying your own seat —He acknowledged that court cases have made it possible for individuals to pour unlimited amounts of money into their own candidacies, and he wishes something could be devised to change that.

6. Imposing some responsibility on the ultimate recipients of campaign money —Ultimately it is the television companies that make huge amounts of money from campaign finance. There should be a price for that benefit, he said, such as requiring that debate time be made available so that voters can see the prime contenders squaring off.

7. The media promote the antithesis of community —He's concerned with the types of interviews conducted by media personalities today that seem to divide communities rather than unite them.

8. Diversity no longer respected? —Durenberger and Caucus members engaged in discussion over the extent of diversity in communities. He acknowledges that people of similar economic levels have lived in close proximity, but now it seems as if people with belief in similar causes also are living near one another. This question relates to the ability to establish boundaries of congressional districts that would create more competition and be fair to various interests.

9. Critical importance of leadership —Durenberger said he sat with Sen. Norm Coleman on a flight back to the Twin Cities this morning. The two discussed the importance of leadership, and particularly the efforts that Coleman, when as mayor of St. Paul, was willing to "take some hits up front", that is, Coleman, as a leader, was willing to take risks early in his tenure, to bring about significant accomplishments, such as the bringing of the Minnesota Wild to St. Paul. It is rare, Durenberger said, to find leaders like that today. Some people have leadership characteristics but are held back by campaign pledges, he said.

10. Forthcoming referenda on gerrymandering —Asked about two states, California and Ohio, and their upcoming votes on constitutional amendments for redistricting commissions, Durenberger said there ought to be a better way to draw boundaries but that he has not followed the details of the California and Ohio proposals.

11. Senate not as polarized as the House? —Verne noted that some people point out that the polarization is not as great in the Senate, which is unaffected by drawing boundaries. Durenberger replied that the difference between the bodies lies in the defining of the national interest. It is much more difficult to define national interest if you have only the House. He went on to characterize that regional interests seem to be dominant in Congress today, not national interest. Republicans in the southwest and southeast now are directing the Republican party. Thus national issues are being defined by a region of the country. Leaders in the southwest and southeast are a different type of American than you might see in a national American. They are much more parochial than the Republican and Democratic leaders of the past.

Asked about the causes for change in the relevance of the Republican Party, Durenberger mentioned major challenges to the nation in the 1970s, including the Viet Nam protests. These developments caused many people to determine that they had an opportunity to determine what is right and what is wrong. People who particularly felt that way after the Roe v. Wade decision have taken over the Republican Party. Durenberger said that former Gov. Elmer Andersen, before his death, advised Durenberger not to worry, that these things will take care of themselves over time.

12. Campaign finance approaches now —The importance of money in campaigns has grown to such an extent, Durenberger said, that each senator now has his or her own PAC. Formerly you had senators who were known as entrepreneurs in certain areas, such as health care. Now you have

senators who are known as entrepreneurs in raising campaign money. That means the senators are working with a much narrower base of supporters. Asked whether he has specific ideas for broadening the base of support, Durenberger said that somehow the special interest groups must be curbed. Interestingly, the people who fight campaign reform now are the pro-life, pro-choice, anti-gun-control and other special interest groups. Clarence asked whether the people with a strong moral interest recognize that they are in allegiance with the money launderers. Durenberger said no, other than Ralph Reed. Clarence and Durenberger agreed that the fervor of the people with moral interest won't change, so that the effort to change ought be concentrated on the campaign finance side.

13. Leadership by "20-20" legislators —Durenberger highlighted efforts by a group of Democratic and Republican members in the Minnesota Legislature to seek a middle ground during the 2005 session. He said such leadership will help a great deal. Members of the caucus said we need to identify—and probably communicate with—people were part of the 20-20 group.

14. Instant run-off voting —Durenberger, asked about the idea surfaced by Tim Penny, said he hasn't give it a lot of thought. Verne said that instant run-off voting, or IRV, is claimed to help people in the middle who feel disenfranchised. Verne asked that we get more information on this program. Paul noted that "Fairvote" is an organization dedicated to promoting IRV.

15. Energizing the middle —Asked again about helping energize the broad middle, Durenberger said why not focus on the people. Find 25 people who are wanting to change. This discussion caused caucus members again to say that we need to learn more about the 20-20 group in the Legislature.

16. Increasing voter interest —Asked how more people might be encouraged to participate as voters, Durenberger said a big part of the solution has to do with leadership. The people want to support elected officials who function truly as leaders. Leadership affects leadership, he said. Returning to Durenberger's comments about Norm Coleman's leadership in St. Paul, John M. noted that Coleman was able to bring something to the city that it never had. Verne noted that Pawlenty has been constrained in his leadership by his campaign pledges. Durenberger said that Republican leaders in Indiana and Idaho have been successful in bringing about changes despite no-tax pledges.

17. Are Republicans in Washington thinking more opposition candidates than their own? — Asked about the general mood among Republicans in Washington concerning the 2008 election, Durenberger said they seem to be discussing more who will be the Democratic front-runner than they seem to be discussing who their own leader should be. Durenberger said the Republicans believe Hillary Clinton will be the Democratic candidate and they will need someone like John McCain to beat her.

B. Thanks —Verne thanked Durenberger for taking the time to meet with us today. Verne said we will be circulating a summary of the meeting to our other electronic participants, after giving Durenberger an opportunity to suggest changes.

***The Civic Caucus* is a non-partisan, tax-exempt educational organization. Core participants include persons of varying political persuasions, reflecting years of leadership in politics and business.**

A working group meets face-to-face to provide leadership. They are Verne C. Johnson, chair; Lee Canning, Charles Clay, Bill Frenzel, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland, John Mooty, Jim Olson, Wayne Popham and John Rollwagen.

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