



Summary of Meeting with Dee Long

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

Friday, December 16, 2005

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

A. Comments by Dee Long —Clarence introduced Dee Long, who served 20 years in the Minnesota House of Representatives, including two years as Speaker of the House. She was the first woman to serve in that position. She currently is director of the environmental tax and incentives program of Minnesotans for an Energy-Efficient Economy (ME3), a coalition of citizens and organizations working to promote efficiency in energy use and increased reliance on home-grown renewable energy. She is a board member and past chair of the Citizens League. In her comments Long made the following points.

1. Her current work with the Center of the American Experiment —She said that many of the issues the Civic Caucus is working on are subjects of a task force of the Center of the American Experiment (CAE) of which she is serving as a member. Earlier this week the task force heard from Alan Rosenthal of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. The CAE task force is interested mainly in what is happening in Minnesota. Problems in Congress are similar to the problems in Minnesota.

Long said the CAE is looking at recommending that majority and minority leaders of committees be required to office together and that legislators receive top offices in the Capitol by seniority, which would have the effect putting Republicans and Democrats in closer proximity to one another.

2. She has read the position paper —Long said she has reviewed the position paper that the Civic Caucus has been sharing with resource persons and that she has no disagreement with that document. She said some of the points in the draft are causes and some are effects.

3. The short-term perspective of the elected official —The fact that so many elected officials are not looking beyond the current year or the next and concentrating mainly on re-election is a big problem, Long said. She recalled that Minnesota legislators in 2002 could have acted to reduce the problem of the deficit that faced the Legislature in 2003, but none had the stomach for spending cuts or tax increases.

4. Give House members four-year terms —Four year terms would give House members a longer-term perspective, she said. Currently, they are campaigning constantly. Asked whether a quid pro quo might be to impose term limits at the same time, Long is less enthusiastic because of the need for

experienced legislators. But she said something like 20 years might be acceptable limit. She said that was plenty long for her to serve. She also said that rotating chairs of committees is a more desirable approach.

5. Need for longer-term budget projections —The Legislature is not fulfilling its responsibility in failing to project budgets six years or more into the future. When you think of the size of health care obligations in the year 2015, it's chilling to think how little is being done. She noted the Citizens League's problem includes developing a fiscal outlook to the year 2020. One legislator asked a top finance official in state government for longer term projections. "If I did that, I'd be fired," the official replied.

6. Lack of real leadership —The big goal seems to be to get the caucus re-elected. Long said leadership is lacking in areas such as water quality, a major interest of hers.

7. Polarization is getting worse —She said Minnesota is more of a purple state now, with people split pretty much down the middle. But the politics are very polarized. Much more demonizing of opponents seems to be occurring today. Long said that she frequently gets together with women on both sides of the aisle who are former office holders in the state, and they all bemoan the current situation. She said that it is important for legislators on both sides to be together in environments outside the Legislature, where they can get to know one another. With polarization it is very difficult to get compromise or to accomplish new goals. She questioned whether today's Legislature would ever pass something like legislation creating the Metropolitan Council.

8. Precinct caucus system is a big problem —The caucuses now have very meager turnouts, and too much sub-caucusing is occurring. Too much insistence occurs on people's stands on issues. She cited an example of two brothers who had worked hard on the McGovern campaign but they were ruled out of any party leadership because they were pro-life.

9. Earlier primaries would be helpful —Long said earlier primaries would be much better, perhaps in June. Asked later in the meeting if the primaries should precede the endorsement conventions, Long said she prefers recommendations in a report authored by Joan Growe, former Secretary of State. The Growe report recommended multiple endorsements with a threshold.

10. Change campaign financing —Long doesn't like the ability of millionaires to finance their own campaigns, nor the fact that the Congress is preoccupied with fund-raising instead of legislating. She also thinks changes in law applying to 527 groups are needed.

11. Criticism of the media —The media focus on controversy, reporting political races as they report sports events or wars. More and more people get their information only from TV. She doesn't like the re-design of the Star Tribune. It's not likely to attract new readers and is more likely to turn off traditional readers.

12. Involve young people earlier —Long, who is a DFLer, and a friend, who is a Republican, tried to provide education for West High School students on precinct caucuses, just when 18-year-olds got the right to vote. But the decision-makers at the school never approved because they were afraid such education would be too controversial. She thinks internships for public high school students would be very good. Some such internships have been available for kids in private schools.

B. Discussion with Long —During the discussion session the following points were made:

1. Take steps to foster collegiality— Long remembers when she, then serving as chair of the House Tax Committee, and Doug Johnson, chair of the Senate Tax Committee, arranged for more informal discussions on a Saturday. Lobbyists heard about the meeting and complained to the Senate Majority Leader. The next week the lobbyists were all over the place. Too much "openness" doesn't make it possible for legislators to have the interchange that will make compromises possible. In response to a question, Long said that criticism of Pawlenty's leadership is more a result of the system under which he is functioning than his own ability.

2. Role of legislative caucus leaders in political campaigns —Long remembers a time when caucus leaders of both houses were running campaigns right out of the State Office Building. Rules were changed to prohibit such blatant activity.

3. Shorten sessions? —Asked about development of professional legislators, Long said more can be done to reduce the length of existing sessions, such as not starting the session until after the February revenue forecast, perhaps sometime in mid-February. Some states have joint budget commissions. Such a group in Minnesota might help. She also recalls that when she was in office, budget targets were set. You didn't like the targets, but their existence helped in making decisions. The Minnesota House and Senate haven't been able to adopt joint rules for many years.

4. Unicameral? —Commenting on whether the Nebraska non-partisan unicameral would be desirable, Long said the existence of the second body serves as a check on the Legislature's adopting bad legislation. She prefers a bi-cameral. Laws requiring open meetings don't really help the conference committee process, however. Televising floor sessions also encourages grandstanding.

5. Fixing gerrymandering —Long recalled that Minnesota voters in 1980 rejected a constitutional amendment for a commission to draw boundaries. But she said that not much attention was given to the amendment. She favors giving redistricting to such commissions. The latest issue of the Citizens League publication *Minnesota Journal* contains an article on the redistricting commission in Iowa.

6. A council of veteran office holders?— One person asked whether a group of people like Long, both Republican and Democratic former office holders, might produce reasonable recommendations for progress. Long said such an idea has promise, although she doesn't know who the sponsor would be or how it would be staffed and funded. She said she'll be interested in seeing the recommendations from the Center of the American Experiment. Further discussing recommendations from commissions, Long said it is disappointing how the 9-11 recommendations haven't been terribly well received.

7. Persistence of single-issue groups —Long was asked to comment on the influence of single-issue groups. Long said the single issue groups are taking steps to strengthen their positions that we never could have imagined. Shortly after the last election she was called by two groups, the NRA and a pro-life group, both to ascertain her position on these issues as a voter. Those are major undertakings simply to identify the exact position of voters.

8. Instant run-off voting —Asked about the potential of instant run-off voting to stimulate candidates to appeal to broader segments of the population, Long said she is intrigued by the possibility and is not completely opposed.

9. The "closed" legislative caucus approach to political campaigns —It was noted that the growing use of the legislative caucus leaders—both in Minnesota and in Washington—is having the effect of further removing the people from the selection of candidates and the financing of the campaigns. There seem to be no suggestions coming forth for opening up the caucuses. Long said she is an advocate of public financing of campaigns. In Minnesota most candidates accept limitations on campaign spending as a way to accept public financing. That, plus immediate identification of contributors, is essential.

10. The benefit of open meeting laws? —Long said open meetings do not help decision making in legislative conference committees. She wishes there were ways to get the legislators away for retreats, where they could visit with one another and talk in an environment where they wouldn't be so publicly identified with certain positions.

C. Thanks

—On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Clarence thanked Long for meeting with us today.