



# Summary of Meeting with Geoff Michel

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

*Friday, December 29, 2006*

**Present:** Verne Johnson, chair (by phone), Lee Canning, Chuck Clay, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland (by phone), John Rollwagen

**Guest speaker:** State Sen. Geoff Michel, assistant minority leader, Minnesota Senate

**A. Context of the meeting :** The Civic Caucus is continuing its inquiry into aspects of Minnesota's election system as they relate to polarization and paralysis of the State Legislature. Today is one of many planned sessions to obtain views of lawmakers.

**B. Implications of the *Star Tribune* sale** —Before getting into the interview with Michel, attendees discussed briefly the implications of this week's sale of the *Star Tribune* to an investment group. Lee Canning, who is a former associate publisher of the *Star Tribune*, reminded attendees that newspapers are experiencing dramatic decreases in readership, particularly among persons under 40 years of age. In an effort to reach such readers the paper devotes far more space to entertainment than ever before. One person wondered how long it will be before the St. Paul and Minneapolis papers become one.

**C. Introduction of Michel** —Michel, a Republican, who was just re-elected to a second four-year term in the Minnesota Senate, and represents Edina and West Bloomington, was introduced. He is leader of a new group of bipartisan legislators known as the 2020 Caucus. His occupation in private life is as an attorney with Securian Financial Group.

**D. Comments and discussion** —In Michel's comments and in discussion with the Civic Caucus the following points were raised:

**1. Thanks to the Civic Caucus** —Michel thanked the Civic Caucus for its seriousness of purpose and love for the state. He thanked the Civic Caucus for the work it has been doing and is pleased to see the group's upcoming schedule (meetings set on January 5 with State Sen. John Marty and on January 19 with outgoing Senate majority leaders Dean Johnson).

**2. Is all politics local?** —Reminding the group of former Massachusetts Congressman and Speaker of the House Thomas "Tip" O'Neill's comment that "All politics is local", Michel thinks the 2006 elections were different. As a Republican Michel was hoping that the unpopularity of the President would not extend down to other elections. But it is clear to him that the 2006 elections were very much a nationalized election, with the Iraq war and other national issues having an effect on local elections.

Michel wonders if changes in communication since O'Neill made his comment in the '80s are a factor, such as the Internet and 24-hour cable news. It's easier to be connected to national and international politics now.

**3. Outlook for the 2007 Minnesota Legislature** —Michel is optimistic about 2007, with the Legislature enjoying a \$2 billion surplus, not a \$5 billion deficit like four years ago.

**4. Review of the "2020" Caucus** —Michel recalled that he and State Sen. Scott Dibble met with the Civic Caucus about one year ago to discuss the newly formed "2020" Caucus in the State Legislature, a bipartisan group of House and Senate members. Of the 23 original members, 22 were re-elected. Ray Cox, the only person defeated, came from a very politically balanced district in Northfield, and lost by less than 50 votes.

More than 50 new faces will be in the Legislature, about one-fourth of the body. Michel is hopeful that more legislators will choose to be part of the 2020 idea. The 2020 Caucus is divided fairly evenly between the two parties and between metro and outstate. Although 2020 Caucus members tend to be younger, with fewer terms served, one of its newest members is veteran State Sen. Ann Rest, DFL, Michel said.

The group took the "2020" name, because that will be the first year when senior citizens outnumber schoolchildren. The group wants to spotlight demographic change and to take steps to deal with change. The Caucus will be pushing two main ideas in the 2007 Legislature:

**a. Extending budget projections** —Today state budget projections are made for the upcoming two- and four-year periods. The 2020 Caucus wants to add a third projection, going out for a longer period of time.

**b. Long term care changes** —Minnesota needs to find better alternatives to nursing homes. The 2020 Caucus is excited about recent legislation in Vermont. Following is an explanation of a new proposal, provided by Michel from a 2020 Caucus news release: Modeled after an award-winning program in Vermont, the 2020 group's proposal would enable greater use of current state funding for home-based and community-based care giving of those in need of long-term care. Since the cost of home-based and community-based care is usually far less expensive than traditional nursing home care, existing funds will go farther. Under Vermont's Choices for Care program, Medicaid-eligible seniors who need someone to tend to their needs have the choice of being cared for at home by a family member, friend or neighbor, who gets paid by the state. One year after enacting it, Vermont officials say it is reducing the number of people sent to nursing homes, cutting the cost of taxpayer-funded care, bringing family members together, and improving life quality while giving people a choice as to where they want to live.

Returning to a discussion of the 2020 Caucus, Michel said that the Citizens League is functioning, in effect, as its staff. He has great confidence in Sean Kershaw, executive director of the Citizens League. Kershaw was part of a recent news conference announcing the 2020 Caucus initiatives for 2007

**5. Problems of gaining media coverage** —In response to a question, Michel said that while electronic media did not come to the 2020 news conference, that the Pioneer Press, Star Tribune, and

Associated Press were represented. A good news article then appeared in the Pioneer Press, plus an editorial in the Star Tribune.

**6. Make legislative districts more competitive** —Moving on to a discussion of possible changes in the elections system, Michel said the big change he would work for is to change redistricting to make districts more competitive. This means, he said, that the job of redistricting ought to be handled outside the Legislature, as is true in some states. With a political split of 70-30, legislators are virtually locked in for 20 or 30 years and never needs to look over their shoulders. Both the GOP and DFL have such districts, he said. By contrast, he said, legislative districts in the western suburbs are very well balanced. Such districts make for energetic and alert legislators.

Michel said he also favors term limits for legislators and, in response to a question, said he intends to draw up a term limit bill. Other 2020 Caucus members might not be as interested in term limits as he is, Michel said. Electoral reform has not come to the top of the 2020 agenda, he said. Asked about how to develop good leadership with more turn over, Michel said he values experience but believes that it can be over-valued, particularly when seniority is so often rewarded and honored. Someone who becomes a committee chair strictly because of seniority is given enormous power over whether bills can be heard or not.

Michel said he agrees with a member of the Civic Caucus who inquired about making "competitiveness" a requirement in a new system of drawing legislative boundaries. In the continuing discussion on this point, it was noted that the summary of a Civic Caucus meeting a few years ago, made reference to other states' efforts at changing redistricting. The summary of the meeting stated: "In Iowa the Legislative Service Bureau has the primary responsibility for drawing proposed congressional and legislative districts, subject to legislative and gubernatorial approval. The Legislative Service Bureau is prohibited from making competition a criterion. That is, the Bureau is not allowed to look at the political composition of proposed districts. In Arizona an entirely different approach is taken. There, the non-partisan commission is required to make the districts competitive. Arizona is one of six states that place final authority for redistricting in a commission. The other five states are Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, New Jersey and Washington. Indiana employs a 'fallback' commission if the legislature is unsuccessful in passing a congressional plan."

In addition to competitiveness, Michel thinks that attention needs to be given to compactness and community.

**7. Instant runoff voting?**— Michel is encouraged that Minneapolis will experiment with instant runoff voting (where, in races with three or more candidates, voters rank candidates in order of preference, with the winner ultimately receiving a majority). Right now, fair or not, he said, Republicans are cool towards instant runoff voting. Republicans see that the 3rd and 4th parties are more on the left and that the votes from these parties will be very influential in selecting the winner.

**8. Possibilities of multi-office districts** —In response to a question, Michel said he had not heard of before, but is somewhat intrigued by, the possibility of having three legislative offices at-large in the same district, with a requirement that a political party could not nominate more than two persons for the three offices. Such an approach would guarantee that a least one elected person would be from the minority party in each district.

**9. Ways to re-enfranchise the middle** —Verne said it might be helpful if we look at the overall strategy of keeping control from getting into a few hands, whether on the left or the right. Such devices as redistricting, term limits, instant runoff voting and multi-office districts are being suggested as ways to strengthen the broad middle, where most voters are. Michel replied that changes in redistricting and term limits are his preferred options.

**10. Change precinct caucuses** —Michel said he is not a fan of precinct caucuses. Precinct caucuses are grass-roots political party meetings that occur in February every two years as the first step in the political endorsement process. He said it is terribly difficult to convince one's neighbors to go to such meetings and then to follow up with county legislative conventions. The precinct caucuses normally attract a small group who are passionate about one subject or another. The subjects that attract such interest aren't the bread-and-butter issues of budgeting but more narrow subjects, often on social matters. As an alternative to precinct caucuses Michel favors opening the primaries to multiple candidates from the same party.

**11. Problems with the legislative caucuses** — (Attn, reader: Yes, the word "caucus" appears in many different contexts. If you're confused, here's a brief road map:

—Civic Caucus: a non-profit organization that is reviewing the elections system and which conducts the meetings from which this and other summaries are prepared.

—2020 Caucus: a bi-partisan group of legislators of which Michel is a member and which is attempting to get the state to take a longer range view of issues.

—Precinct Caucus: the grass-roots political party meetings that occur in February every other year as the first step in the nominating process for elective office.

—Legislative Caucus: the groups within the Legislature that handle organizational matters within the Legislature and, in more recent years, have played a major role in financing and conducting legislative campaigns. Four Legislative Caucuses are in the Minnesota Legislature, the House DFL Caucus, the House GOP Caucus, the Senate DFL Caucus, and the Senate GOP Caucus.)

The role of legislative caucuses in campaigns is huge and growing, Michel said. For the last six months of 2006 the GOP and DFL Caucuses were targeting each others' legislative races. It's very hard to shift gears in this process, Michel said. That is, it is difficult to work with a legislator of the opposing party on trying to pass legislation and then to shift gears and start raising money and finding candidates to defeat your colleague on the opposite side of the aisle.

The legislative caucuses are doing most of the dirty work in the campaigns, that is, attacking the opponent in ways that the candidate would never think of doing.

In the past two legislators on opposite side of the aisle would conduct their own campaigns without the legislative caucuses being involved. In such situations they could work together in the Legislature. Both would know that they'd need to campaign for re-election, but each would know that legislators in the other party wouldn't be actively working for their defeat.

Verne urged that Michel and others read the summary of our meeting with Sheila Kiscaden to get a detailed look at the role of the legislative caucuses in closely-fought races in the Rochester area this fall.

**12. Unlimited fund-raising ability in legislative caucuses** —Michel contrasted the law governing contributions to individual candidates' campaigns with that governing contributions to legislative caucuses. You can give \$100 to a legislative candidate before encountering any statutory limits on giving. But you can give \$1 million (or any amount, without limit) to a legislative caucus, he said.

**13. Possible changes in law** —Asked about supporting limits on contributions to legislative caucuses or limits on how much legislative caucuses can spend on individual races, Michel said he believes that if you limit spending in one way, another way will be figured out to direct the money. It was noted that David Schultz has recommended strict limits on the amounts that can be given to any legislative caucus

**14. A change in attitude in St. Paul and Washington, DC?** —Verne mentioned that many state and national elected officials seem to be talking increasingly about cooperation with one another, in light of the recent elections. Is it possible, Verne asked, that there'll be a change in attitude this year? Michel said he is optimistic that the Minnesota Legislature in 2007 could be the most productive in 10 years. Consensus on environment, education and health care seems very possible. The new Democratic majority in the Legislature will want to have a positive record, as will GOP Gov. Pawlenty. The DFL wouldn't like to be blamed if there is a shutdown in state government because of polarization. He's not so optimistic about Washington, D.C.

He wishes that the legislative bodies would get away from permanent campaigning and get about the business of governing.

**15. Where healthy retirees choose to live** —Jim Hetland said that he hopes the state demographer, in longer term forecasting as recommended by the 2020 Caucus, will evaluate where retirees in good shape choose to live. Will they move out of the state, or will tax credits be needed to encourage them to stay?

**16. The Civic Caucus demonstration** —Verne clarified for Michel and others that the Civic Caucus is trying to demonstrate to the Citizens League and others that new ways of sharing information and participating in public affairs are needed. We would be very pleased if the Citizens League, for example, would adopt our process, Verne said. Michel said we still need face-to-face dialogue. He said he prefers face-to-face, one-on-one contact with legislators, constituents and others when discussing legislation.

**17. Thanks-** -Members thanked Michel for meeting with us this morning.

***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.**