



Summary of Meeting with John Hottinger

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Friday, April 6, 2007

Speaker: John C. Hottinger, consultant, former majority leader, Minnesota Senate

Present: Verne Johnson, chair; Lee Canning, Chuck Clay, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland, and Clarence Shallbetter

A. Context of the meeting —This is another in a series of meetings on possible changes in the political/elections process to strengthen representative democracy.

B . Welcome and introduction —Verne and Paul welcomed and introduced John C. Hottinger. Hottinger served in the Minnesota State Senate from 1991 to 2006. He served as majority leader in the 2003 session. The newsletter *Politics in Minnesota* named him "Rookie of the Year" in 1991. He has a B.S. degree with majors in journalism and economics from the University of St. Thomas, and a law degree from Georgetown University. He has held several positions in the Council of State Governments, including co-chief executive officer in 2004. He said he is currently writing a book about history and baseball—tying contemporary events to notable World Series'— that will be published next April

C. Comments and discussion —In Hottinger's comments and in discussion with the Civic Caucus the following points were raised:

Importance of legislative turnover —Hottinger, who chose not to run for re-election in 2006, said he likes the concept of legislative turnover, although he is opposed to term limits. He sees a tendency for incumbents to become unduly resistant to change in policy areas where they previously have sponsored successful legislation.

A seeker of solutions —Hottinger said that he is a Democrat but has worked well with people on both sides of the aisle. Ideology and political labels don't define whether you are seeking solutions. On occasion he has found that some people with political views widely different from his own are much more interested in finding solutions than are some people whose political views are much closer to his.

Changes since 1991 —When he began serving in the Legislature in 1991, he said that legislators then were much more cooperative and interested in better policy than today. He gave as examples the establishment of Minnesota Care, providing subsidized health coverage for eligible Minnesotans, and a crime bill in 1992, even though it was an election year.

He recalled that when he first got involved with the Council of State Governments(CSG) that officials from other states always would say that Minnesota was different because innovative policy change was possible here. You don't hear that anymore, he said. The CSG is an organization of all elected and appointed officials in the 50 states, from the executive, legislative and judicial branches.

Governing Magazine , in February 1997, published an article by a professor from Rutgers, that contrasted a drop in leadership in Minnesota with a rise in leadership in Tennessee. See: <http://www.governing.com/archive/1997/feb/legis.txt>.

In discussion with Civic Caucus members Hottinger said that he agrees that Minnesota's leadership position in the nation has declined in recent years.

Faith in younger generation —Hottinger, representing the Mankato-St. Peter area, frequently has spent time with students at Minnesota State University-Mankato and at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter. He also spent last spring speaking at over 15 colleges around Minnesota about civic involvement. He senses that students have a strong interest in public affairs and are hungry for good information even though their voting participation leaves something to be desired. Students are active in political parties and get much of their public affairs information from part sources. He said that the experience at both localinstitutions is not identical and that voter turnout is higher among Gustavus students.

Sources of public affairs information —While a decline in public affairs information from mainstream media is of wide concern, Hottinger said that young people are quite adept at gaining information from diversified internet sources.

Reducing cynicism about government —Hottinger said his efforts are concentrated in three areas to provide what he called "attractive access" for people in three areas: access to information, access to the voting booth, and access to the decision-making process. He's done a great deal of work with officials of Canadian provinces and is impressed with their system of questioning one another. We're so close to Canada yet know so little about their system, he said.

Development of a new center —Hottinger is working on the development of a new Center for Intergovernmental Cooperation and Civility, with an emphasis on relating state governments in the USA to one another and to Mexico and to Canada.

Access to the voting booth —Despite some small possibilities for fraud, Hottinger comes down on the side of increasing access to voting for people. He regards voting as a right, not a privilege. We have a good system to protect against fraud and ought not to hold back on expanding access because of a few possibilities for abuse. Very few people are going to risk a felony simply to add one vote to a candidate's total. He said Nelson Rockefeller had the same concept in improving welfare: that potential fraud can be contained while access is improved.

In response to a question Hottinger said he believes that it is possible to overcome problems and give voters the opportunity to vote via the internet. He has talked extensively with elected officials in Oregon, which has an extensive program of voting by mail.

Support for instant runoff voting —He likes the proposal to allow voters to rank candidates in order of preference. Such a system means that someone can support a minority party candidate without fear of wasting a vote. With IRV a voter could support a third candidate without harming the chances of either of the two main candidates, because ultimately the second choices of people supporting the third candidate would be allocated to the other two candidates.

In discussion it also was noted that IRV will re-enfranchise moderate voters, who will be able to support moderate candidates without favoring someone on the far left or the far right.

Impact of legislative caucuses running campaigns —The group went on to discuss the major role that the majority and minority legislative caucuses in the House and Senate now play in running campaigns. Hottinger said that the legislative caucuses—while always concerned about gaining majorities in the past—are now chiefly absorbed with winning elections instead of developing sound public policy in the Legislature.

Hottinger said that when he was majority leader in the Senate, he had unbelievable pressure to raise money. His role was to raise the money and decide how to spend it.

The political parties no longer play a significant role in the election of state legislators. That job has been taken over by the legislative caucuses. And the money raised by the caucuses dwarfs the money raised by individual candidates' campaign committees, sometimes on the order of 10 to 1.

Hottinger agreed that controversy is present over whether legislators feel more beholden to their respective caucuses because of the substantial role caucuses play in raising money. The obligation to support the caucus position on a given issue because of campaign financing is significant but not as strong as many persons would think. The desire to have a caucus position prevail is very strong, irrespective of campaign financing.

Asked further about the declining role of political parties—and the increasing role of the caucuses—in running legislative campaigns, Hottinger said need for money is the main reason, not the decline in the importance of the parties.

While our system of campaign finance urgently needs improvement, things are bad elsewhere, too, Hottinger said. He was visiting with a legislator from Oregon recently who had spent \$800,000 in a campaign, which is significantly more than has been raised in the most closely-contested legislative races in Minnesota.

Importance of campaign finance —Hottinger said he ranks the issues of campaign finance at the top of any list of needs for improving the state's election system. The biggest barrier to accomplishing changes in campaign finance is opposition from certain strong single-issue organizations. The campaign finance question produces widespread cynicism in the public.

Differences between the House and Senate —It's important to understand that differences between the House and Senate occur even without their being controlled by different parties. Conflicts are inevitable in the Legislature but sometimes the biggest conflicts are between the two bodies. "Caucus ego", which he defines as an overwhelming interest in being perceived as a "winner" at the end of session, sometimes undermines the larger importance of finding viable approaches to policy. One

significant source of conflict is resentment that House members feel over the creation of the Minnesota State Colleges and University system (MnSCU). A law passed in 1991 and that went into effect in 1995 merged the state's community colleges, technical colleges and state universities into one system. House members felt the change was forced down their throat in the final minutes of a regular session , he said."

Reduce the number of committees —The current House structure is unwieldy, awkward and self-defeating, with its 35 committees, Hottinger said. Everyone wants to be a committee chair; bills must be referred to too many committees before reaching the floor. He believes the Senate has an equally complex and burdensome committee process. One of the biggest problems is the lack of coordination between the committee structures and the failure to have joint hearings or even joint committees, as many other states successfully do.

Hottinger believes the number of House and Senate members should be reduced. He would not support a unicameral Legislature, however. In a unicameral, too much power will be concentrated in one individual, from one part of the state, as chair of an influential committee, such as transportation. The bicameral approach offers a check on such power.

Some uncertainty was present over whether the state constitution prescribes the number of legislators. The key constitutional phrase, Article IV, Section 2, reads as follows: "The number of members who compose the senate and house of representatives shall be prescribed by law."

Full-time Legislature? —Hottinger is less concerned about how frequently the Legislature meets than what it discusses. He has no objection to a more professional legislature with higher pay. He said provincial governments in Canada pay legislators as much as \$120,000 a year. The second year of a biennium should concentrate on one issue that needs serious attention, such as health care, he said. In discussion on this point it was noted that in previous years the Legislature had tried to limit the off-year session to non-budget or non-bonding issues. Now budget bills and bonding bills are passed every year.

Ways to stimulate higher voter turnout —The group turned to a discussion of a national effort spearheaded Fair Vote to create a national popular vote for President. Hottinger said that turnout for voting for President now is light in certain states that are heavily Republican or heavily Democratic because the winner in those states is usually a foregone conclusion. A national vote for President would mean that every voter would have influence, irrespective of the state. He said he supports a national vote for President, even using the approach advocated by Fair Vote that enables the electoral college to be effectively bypassed.

It was noted in discussion that increasing the turnout for presidential elections doesn't necessarily produce a higher turnout in state and local elections. Hottinger believes more effort to demonstrate to potential voters how much their lives affected by legislative decisions will help contribute to higher turnouts.

Opposition to cluttering the state constitution with revenue-raising measures —Hottinger said he supported the Civic Caucus position last fall in opposition to a measure that created additional constitutionally-guaranteed revenues for transportation. He also opposes similar efforts for environmental and arts issues that are actively being considered by 2007 Legislature.

Change the system for selecting judges —He is very opposed to turning the selection of judges over to a partisan politically-charged elections process. He likes most of the recommendations from a commission headed by former Gov. Al Quie, although Hottinger prefers a merit selection system without retention elections.

Support for change in redistricting —Hottinger said he supports changing the redistricting process. He said he likes the approach in Iowa.

19. Possibility of a "package" approach for improvement —It was noted in discussion that currently a host of suggestions are being offered for changes in the elections process, including many that didn't come up today. Hottinger said he agrees that a package proposal would be a good way to consider the changes, rather than placing each in a separate bill.

Public's attitudes can change faster than the political process —Hottinger noted that the public can change much faster than the structure of our political institutions. As an example, he cited moderating views among Republicans on gay rights.

Faith in younger people —Based on his connections with youth at Minnesota State University-Mankato and Gustavus Adolphus College, as well as at the other higher education institutions he spoke at last spring and observing his own three children, Hottinger said he has a high degree of confidence in the younger generation's commitment to improving government.

22. Thanks— On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne thanked Hottinger for meeting with us today.

***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.

Click Here to see a biographical statement of each.