



Summary of Meeting with Larry Pogemiller

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Thursday, December 13, 2007

Present (all by phone): Verne C. Johnson, chair; Chuck Clay, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland, John Mooty, Wayne Popham, and John Rollwagen

Guest speaker: State Senator Larry Pogemiller

A. Welcome and introduction —Verne and Paul welcomed and introduced State Senator Larry Pogemiller, Minneapolis, Senate Majority Leader. Pogemiller was served one term in the House before being elected to the Senate in 1982, where he has served ever since. He has chaired major committees in the Senate including the Tax committee and the K12 Education Budget Division. Pogemiller has a bachelor's degree from the University of Minnesota, and a master's in public administration from the JFK School of Government at Harvard University.

B. Comments and discussion —During Pogemiller's comments and in discussion with the Civic Caucus the following points were raised:

1. A sharp partisan divide —Pogemiller said a sharp partisan divide in the Minnesota Legislature is reflective of the nation in general. The sharp divide is a reflection of disagreement over the role of government in people's lives and a reflection of decentralization of power in running campaigns. Today one might think that there's more centralization of power, but that is not the case. It's pretty much a free market for candidates. They can use computer power to develop their own data bases and to raise their own money. They don't need the larger political organizations as they did in the past. An outcome of the independence of legislators is an increasing difficulty to accomplish goals of the leadership and its legislative caucuses.

Another aspect of the partisan divide is whether—because of the speed with which information travels today— certain parts of constitutional government need to be re-examined. It is much harder to respond in a timely fashion to problems as they arise.

2. How to reduce the partisan divide —Asked for specific proposals to reduce partisanship, Pogemiller said the key need is for contending parties to be civil in their disputes. He said legislators, interest groups, and people who run campaigns all need a concerted effort for civility. In addition, he said, truth almost doesn't matter any more, and with the shakeup in the media it is more difficult to point out what is, and isn't, truthful in debate. What's happening in the media today is a throwback to a

time in the past, he said, when all the old media were very clear about their partisan identification, and wrote accordingly.

3. Reduce number of "safe" seats in the Legislature —Something that might help, Pogemiller said, is for there to be fewer safe seats created in redistricting. He personally has been through three rounds of redistricting. He wouldn't remove politics from the redistricting process, but he'd like to keep the process from becoming hyper-political. He's not excited about the Iowa redistricting system which, he said, leaves too many decisions to the computer.

4. Keep further politicization out of the courts —While not going into detail about how change would be accomplished, Pogemiller said changes should be made to keep further politicization out of the courts. He said the 2008 Legislature will take up the issue for sure and will consider the Quie commission report and other suggestions. He'd support a constitutional amendment if that is what would be necessary.

5. Education not changing quickly enough —Asked to expand on his point about difficulty in responding quickly to problems, Pogemiller said K-12 education is the best example. K-12 education was built to last, but it has not changed quickly enough to meet the changing needs of children.

6. Growing role of legislative caucuses in campaigns —Pogemiller said the legislative caucuses are spending considerable funds on the most highly contested legislative races (about seven in the Senate, and 20-30 in the House.) It's an unfortunate example of driving politics further underground, he said.

Pogemiller disputed claims that funds invested by the legislative caucuses are causing legislators to feel unduly beholden to their caucus leadership. The independence of individual legislators remains very strong, he said.

7. Top legislative leaders not exerting too much control —Pogemiller disputed a concern expressed by State Rep. Alice Hausman in a column by Lori Sturdevant in the *Star Tribune* last September that the Governor, Speaker of the House, and Senate Majority Leader are centralizing in themselves the key decisions on which legislation should be enacted.

One needs to be cautious about reading too much into pictures or video of top legislative leaders parading into the Governor's office late in the session, Pogemiller said. Because of the publicity he and the House Speaker have now agreed that those media photo opportunities won't be repeated, he said.

Pogemiller said that before he was elected majority leader he had chaired 12 conference committees and not once was he told by top leadership that he couldn't cut a deal.

He said that as current majority leader he has never once told committee chairs they had to wait for a decision by caucus leadership before taking action in committee.

8. Reasons why it's so difficult to take significant action —The North Star (a reference to Minnesota) has dimmed, Pogemiller said. He recalls distinctly how legislative leaders in other states used to turn to Minnesota for innovative solutions, but no longer. We're lagging in job growth, but we aren't leading in ways to add jobs.

Currently, he said, the Legislature is in a fairly rigid situation, with the Governor not interested in doing too much, and that has slowed the Legislature's ability to get things done. Look at the transportation bill, he said, there was a strong consensus in the Legislature to take aggressive action, but the Governor didn't offer support.

Asked if there's a way to lead the state back, Pogemiller said the nation is on the verge of making a significant change in leadership that will have impact on the mood in Minnesota. He sees potential for a significant consensus on energy and the environment and health care.

9. Invest in education— In Minnesota the best thing the state could do for its economy is to increase its investment in education, Pogemiller said. In response to a question, he said that charter schools are helpful but not a panacea. Part of the solution, he said, must be more authority for the faculty at each school. It was noted that in some school districts, including Minneapolis, vacancies in schools are filled by teacher seniority, which means that some senior teachers select the schools with fewer at-risk children. Pogemiller replied that there'd be no problem if all schools in the state had enrollments with a proportionate share of at-risk children.

10. Support for constitutional amendment —A constitutional amendment would not be Pogemiller's preferred solution for additional funds for outdoors, clean water, and the arts, but no other way seems available to get the revenue that is needed in the current political atmosphere, he said. The amendment is a way to bring the conservation and cultural interests together.

If this amendment is passed, why won't education interests follow with their amendment? Pogemiller was asked. Pogemiller thought this wouldn't happen since 40% of the general fund is already devoted to K12 education. It is unlikely that education groups would want to pursue a constitutional dedication of revenue for education.

11. Allowing outside interests a special voice on appropriations —Pogemiller was asked why the Legislature is considering giving non-legislative interests a special voice on appropriating funds that might be made available in an outdoors constitutional amendment. He said that the proposal is for the creation of a citizens group whose members would be appointed by the Governor and the Legislature. The proposal gives the group the responsibility of allocating funds raised by the sales tax. This proposal is not yet in the conference committee report, and it is still under consideration. If this proposal were to be adopted, it would still need legislative approval in the form of a bill. But, the proposal is under serious consideration because the appointment process allows for legislative oversight while still allowing room for dedicated members of the public to be involved in the process.

12. Precinct caucuses are no longer dominated so much by special interests —Pogemiller has seen a change both locally and nationally on one-issue voters dominating the political process. Thus he's not so concerned that precinct caucuses in Minnesota will produce candidates who are tied strongly to special interests.

13. Support for enabling legislation on Instant Runoff Voting (IRV) —Pogemiller said he supports proposed legislation that would make it possible for Minnesota cities to enact IRV for their own municipal elections, should they choose to do so.

14. Support for a presidential primary —He said he would support Minnesota having a presidential primary. If it were in effect now, he'd favor such a primary on February 5, the date of precinct caucuses.

15. Support for moving primary election date forward —Pogemiller likes an earlier primary date because intra-party battles would end sooner, leaving more time to campaign against the other parties' candidates.

16. Support for a metro sales tax for transportation —"Absolutely," a one-half cent metro sales tax for transportation is needed he said. It's not enough just to rely on the gasoline tax, he said. One bridge is down and that costs \$200 million to \$300 million. The state needs something on the order of \$1.7 billion to \$2.2 billion more each year. The transportation problem isn't a structural problem; it's a revenue problem, and the sooner we admit that, the better, he said.

17. Taking revenue sources from other functions? —Asked whether a metro sales tax would be invading revenue sources that other functions need, such as education, that don't have ready access to user fees, Pogemiller said a metro sales tax for transportation wouldn't take anything away from education.

18. Challenges in the upcoming session —Pogemiller said a major challenge will be to balance the budget in the 2008 session. There won't be much available. Asked about the need for such functions as early childhood development, Pogemiller said the state has the capacity to fund such needs. It's the political will that is lacking.

19. Use income tax to increase investment in education —The data is overwhelming that increasing investment in education would help the state's economy, and that such investment should be financed by an increase in the state income tax on higher income earners, he said.

20. Early childhood development an area of potential consensus —It was noted that Governor Pawlenty and Sen. Pogemiller both have come out in favor of early childhood development. Pogemiller said that is an area where a consensus is possible, although it will be very difficult if the Governor sticks with a no new tax pledge. Early childhood development shouldn't need a sales tax, Pogemiller said, but if a penny increase in the sales tax were suggested for early childhood, he would support the idea.

21. Put Minnesota in the forefront —People of goodwill want to put Minnesota in the forefront. They know it takes courage. Unfortunately, the political will is lacking. Minnesota has prospered as a high investment state and we're now seeing that it was a failed experiment to try to become a low investment state. We need to return to the strong bipartisan programs of the 1950s to 1970s, he said.

22. Improve the media —Pogemiller said he agrees that strong media are needed. Print media doesn't seem to have as much impact TV and talk radio anymore, he said. People seem to be drawn to the visual nature of TV.

23. Thanks —On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne thanked Pogemiller 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.