Summary of Meeting with Martin Sabo

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Friday, February 16, 2007

Guest Speaker: etired Minnesota 5th District Rep. Martin Sabo

Present: Verne Johnson, chair; Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland, Jim Olson (by phone), and Wayne Popham (by phone)

A. Context of the meeting : The Civic Caucus is conducting several meetings with individuals with broad experience in public affairs in Minnesota, to identify main reasons for polarization and paralysis in government and to identify possibilities for change. Today we're meeting with Martin Sabo, who retired from Congress at the beginning of this year.

B. Welcome and introduction —Paul introduced Sabo, a DFLer, who was first elected to the Minnesota Legislature in 1960. Sabo served as minority leader and then Speaker of the House during his 18 years of service in the Legislature. In 1978 he was elected to the U. S. House of Representatives from Minnesota's 5th district and served until he chose not to run for re-election in 2006.

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

1. Precinct caucuses, party endorsement, primary elections —Sabo would not make changes in these areas in state law. He goes back and forth on the need to advance the date of the primary, as suggested by a bipartisan group yesterday. He doesn't know when a late primary has caused any problems. It's tough to beat an endorsed candidate in a four-way race, such as existed in the primary for his open seat last June. The party can use the money effectively to get out the vote, which is a great asset for the party-endorsed candidate, in this case, Keith Ellison. He also suspects that endorsements by Labor and other interest made a real difference.

2. Multiple endorsements not needed —Sabo does not favor multiple endorsements by a party, for all candidates above a certain threshold of support. An unendorsed candidate still has a good chance to win under the present system. He recalled several examples where an unendorsed candidate was nominated, including Rudy Perpich for Governor, Mark Dayton for Senator and Mike Hatch for Attorney General.

He also doesn't think the time between the primary and general elections is too short. He recalled that Skip Humphrey was leading in the polls one month before the election for Governor in 1998 but lost because of a surge in support for Jesse Ventura. Humphrey wasn't defeated because of lack of time to campaign.

3. Minnesota should have a presidential primary —Sabo would favor the Legislature's establishing a presidential primary in Minnesota, possibly the same day as that of Wisconsin. Minnesota's current participation in selecting presidential nominees is essentially irrelevant, he said. Asked why Minnesotans have tolerated such a situation for such a long time, he said that the state abolished the primary after Estes Kefauver—who was not favored by certain political leaders in Minnesota—pulled off a surprising victory over Adlai Stevenson in the Minnesota Democratic presidential primary in 1956. In the years since the question of re-introducing a presidential primary in Minnesota often hit a snag because of the need for voters to openly identify their party preference in such a primary, an identification that has not been not popular with Minnesota voters. He believes there are ways to get around this problem.

4. Shortcomings of precinct caucuses —Sabo agreed with comments by a Civic Caucus member that precinct caucuses seem to be dominated by single-issue attendees. The precinct caucus is an essential element of the political party structure, because it provides the mechanism for selecting convention delegates. In response to a question, Sabo said the reason he didn't announce his retirement before last year's precinct caucuses is that he hadn't yet decided to retire.

5. Surprising motivation for endorsement —It is surprising, he said, that the mentality of political conventions—at least in the DFL—is so strong in favor of coming out with an endorsement, even when an endorsement convention is closely divided. It's as if endorsement has become an end in itself, irrespective of whether it makes sense in a given race, he said.

6. No regrets at not seeking re-election —Sabo said he doesn't regret not running for re-election although had he been re-elected, and with the Democrats taking control of the House, he would have been named chair of the Subcommittee on Homeland Security of the Appropriations Committee.

7. Earmarking appropriations is not a serious problem —The problem isn't so much that influential members of Congress are diverting appropriations for their own pet projects, he said. What people criticize as earmarking are actions that the Congress takes that otherwise would be made by political appointees of the incumbent Administration. The impact of distribution of funds by formula is much greater than earmarking, but members of Congress pay little attention to the formulas.

He took note of newly-adopted changes that will require the congressional committee to list the name of every member who requested specific earmaking of funds. Such a requirement will require an incredible amount of staff work but might likely produce more problems than it solves. Members of Congress like publicity on earmarking. Sometimes they claim credit even if they had nothing to do with an appropriation. Such members of Congress won't like it if the staff doesn't list them as having requested certain earmarking.

In the continuing discussion on earmarking, Sabo agreed that the seniority system dominates the earmarking process, but he said that earmarking occurs in the language of the reports that come from

the committees, not in law. Earmarking must meet guidelines of existing law and occur within the budget limits of the committee.

8. Difficulty of getting campaign financing laws to work as intended —Sabo recalled that the Minnesota Legislature in 1973 enacted public funding for campaigns, provided spending limits were followed, along with reporting requirements on campaign fund-raising and spending. But today such campaign financing laws no longer are working, at the state or the federal level. One possible exception is that the laws constrain some spending in uncontested races. He said he doesn't know what the solution is. We aren't going to interfere with the constitutional right to free speech, which is the guarantee that protects all the independent expenditures in campaigns. He remembered former Senator Eugene McCarthy saying that defending against assaults on the Bill of Rights was one of three major battles he fought while in Congress. (The other two were opposing Joe McCarthy and opposing the Viet Nam War.)

Sabo took note of the substantial increase in the role of the legislative caucuses, which is even more dramatic at the federal level than at the state level. He can't figure out why people are so concerned about making sure that lobbyists can't spend $25 on a lunch for a member of Congress, but can tolerate the enormous amounts that are raised as independent expenditures. Members of Congress are assigned a certain level of dues—that is, amounts they are to raise in independent expenditures. Sabo said he had been instructed to raise a very significant amount of money last year before he announced his retirement. He said he didn't come close to raising his "dues". While limits exist on amounts you can give to an individual candidate or a Political Action Committee, no limits exist on how much can be given to the congressional caucus. A member of Congress raises money for that member's campaign and then writes a check to the congressional caucus from those funds. Such funds are regarded as "excess funds" for an individual's campaign. The congressional caucus then targets the funds for tough races.

It is ironic, Sabo said, how a member of Congress can visit an industrial plant but can't eat the box lunch that's provided. At the same time unlimited funds can be channeled to the congressional caucuses.

9. Prohibit leadership political action committees (PACs) at the federal level —Leadership PACs are formed by members of Congress, candidates and political notables to raise money independent of their own campaign. Sabo said such PACs should be prohibited at the federal level by members of Congress. There's always a threat that receiving committee chairmanships will be tied to a member's level of fund raising. There is incredible pressure on members of Congress to raise money for these PACs, he said. An unintended result of the McCain-Feingold campaign finance law has been the increased pressure on the individual member of Congress to raise money.

10. Role of legislative caucuses in fund raising is understandable —Sabo said he somewhat understands the growing role of the legislative caucuses at the state level in fund raising. At least the money spent there advances a broader agenda than that of a special interest group, he said. A Civic Caucus member commented that a legislator who is elected because of legislative caucus support becomes beholden to that legislative caucus on key votes.

11. Influence of outside groups on lawmakers —Sabo said that before 1973, when he became House Speaker in Minnesota, there were a handful of industries outside the Legislature with

significant power. So there's never been a time of "good old days", where certain groups didn't have extraordinary influence. He acknowledged there's been an explosion of interest groups in the years since. But to a certain degree the large number of groups has the effect of diminishing the power of any one group. We still have that problem today, but in a different form.

12. Influence of the "small contributor" funds —Sabo said there's a dark side of the funds that are raised in small amounts. He cited the ability of Jesse Helms to accumulate very large sums of money from small contributions. Many so-called "knights in shining armor" are able to raise lots of money this way. These groups are "ideologically pure", with a simple message for their supporters, be it environment, gun control, right to life, or other issues. The organizations are very well organized and strident. Some other organizations that raise money in larger chunks recognize they need to be accommodating. If your biggest concern is polarization, check to see whether polarization isn't produced more because of small-dollar-fund-raising organizations. The message he wants to convey is that influence from campaign contributions exists irrespective of the size of the contribution.

13. Summing up —In an interchange with Verne Johnson, Civic Caucus chair, Sabo said he agrees that the process of identifying, nominating and electing individuals to Congress and the State Legislature has many serious problems. Some persons would even say the system is broken. But Sabo said he doesn't know how to fix it.

Sabo said he does not support a concept advanced by Al Quie that all campaign money spent on a candidate must be raised within the geographic area where the candidate runs. Too much variance in wealth exists among election districts to make such an idea equitable, he said

14. Sabo not excited about instant runoff voting (IRV) —Sabo said he has seen voters spending a great deal of time at the polls simply trying to understand the ballot. He said such a situation would be magnified with instant runoff voting, a system by which individuals rank candidates in their order of preference. He said he personally has difficulty understanding the system. He said that the primary in a non-partisan election will produce the two final candidates, who will go head-to-head at the general election, so he doesn't see the need for IRV. Sabo was questioned further about whether IRV would be an asset for a voter in races with more than two candidates because the voter wouldn't have to fear that a vote would be "wasted", if cast for someone other than the two leading candidates. It was also noted that IRV would have the effect of saving money by making a primary unnecessary in local races without party identification.

15. Sabo cool toward redistricting commissions —In discussion of past redistricting battles in Minnesota, Sabo said he recalls that the courts (federal or state) have ultimately decided redistricting in Minnesota in every legislative reapportionment since 1959 and in every congressional reapportionment since 1971. He is cool toward redistricting commissions, because he doesn't see how they remove political influence. Somewhere, some politician will appoint someone. Moreover, he hasn't seen that the courts are exempt from political influence.

16. Fighting the single-interest groups continues to be the biggest battle —As the meeting drew to a close, Sabo recounted the extent of the difficulty he encountered some 30 years ago in the Minnesota Legislature in trying to replace categorical grants for social services with a general block grant to local governments. All the interest groups want their own special funding area for themselves, even to the degree that less money, is available from the categorical grants, he said. He recalled that

a block grant bill was adopted but then was largely decimated within a few years as the special interests again prevailed.

He recalled a similar example at the federal level where advocates for child care were seeking their own funding level, rather than having a share of a broader grant. The advocacy groups were much more interested in keeping their identity with the fund and having less total money available.

17. Concern over the media's role —Sabo believes the media is preoccupied with the back-and-forth nature of comments by the elected officials, trying to play "I gotcha", rather than reporting the substance of a controversy. Moreover, bloggers on the internet seem to be making things worse.

18. Thanks —On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne thanked Sabo for meeting with us this morning.

T he 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.