



# Summary of Meeting with John Wodele

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

*Thursday, August 16, 2007*

**Guest speaker** : John Wodele, consultant, representing the Council for Electoral Leadership

**Present:** Verne Johnson, chair; Chuck Clay, Bill Frenzel (by phone), Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland (by phone), and Jim Olson (by phone)

**A. Introduction of Wodele** —Verne and Paul introduced Wodele, consultant and representative of the Council for Electoral Leadership, a multi-partisan organization that is lobbying the Legislature to advance the date of the primary election from September to June. Wodele served as a key advisor to former Governor Jesse Ventura. He is a former mayor of Wabasha, MN, and ran unsuccessfully for mayor of Minneapolis in 1993. He coordinated the Minnesota primary and general election campaign for Bill Clinton in 1992.

**B. Commentary and discussion** —During Wodele's remarks and in discussion with the Civic Caucus the following points were raised:

**1. Background on the Council for Electoral Leadership** —The Council was formed primarily by the initiative of Kelly Doran, who had dropped out of the race for DFL nominee for governor in 2006. Doran led in the formation of the Council, whose membership includes key representatives of the Republican Party (Bill Cooper), the DFL Party (Vance Opperman), and the Independence Party (Dean Barkley). The goal of the Council was to focus on a central electoral objective, changing the primary date, rather than a broad agenda. The Council is a 501 (c) (4) organization, which means that contributions are not deductible, but the Council engages in direct education and lobbying of the Legislature. The Council raised \$25,000 and spent \$20,000 last year, most of which was for lobbying and administrative expense. The Council has about 80 members. There are no dues, as such, although the money is raised from within the membership.

The Board of Directors of the Council currently has two objectives, continuing its work on changing the primary date, and changing campaign finance. The Council expects to have a campaign finance proposal ready for the 2009 Legislature.

**2. Progress on moving the primary date** —During 2007 the Council had some success in moving a bill for changing the primary date. The bill got to the floor in both the House and Senate. Steve Simon was the House author and Dan Larson, the Senate author. While there was good House support, the DFL leadership declined to bring the bill to a vote because it feared unfriendly amendments from Republicans. Early on, the various party representatives on the Council agreed that they would work

for a "clean" bill, dealing only with the date of the primary. Enough votes weren't available in the Senate to pass the bill.

The bill provides that the primary would move from the first Tuesday after the first Monday in September to the second Tuesday in June. The Council isn't locked into that language, Wodele said. The Council would like the primary in June, before the heat of the summer.

**3. Fear of impact on incumbents** —The biggest problem the Council encountered in the Legislature was fear that incumbent legislators would be placed at a disadvantage if the primary date were advanced, Wodele said. Legislators feared that they'd have too little time to campaign, because they'd be occupied with the legislative session during most of the spring.

Wodele said, however, that primary challenges are rare in both parties. Generally, primary battles occur when there's an open seat. Further, other legislators believe an early primary is an advantage to an incumbent. Incumbents might not be too anxious to get drawn into a debate with primary challengers who are anxious for attention. Thus incumbents can claim they are too busy in St. Paul to come back to the district for campaigning.

Nevertheless, incumbents get nervous when they are sitting in the Legislature and imagine opponents going door-to-door back home, up to 300 miles away.

**4. Advantages of an earlier primary** —The political parties like an earlier primary, he said, because the bulk of campaigning can be concentrated on defeating the other parties' candidates, not with intra-party squabbles. A political party can concentrate its finances and energy on the general election. Also an earlier primary increases the likelihood that a party's endorsee will survive the primary.

**5. Possible connection with gerrymandering** -A Civic Caucus member said that gerrymandering creates more safe districts. A later primary might offset the gerrymandering advantage to some degree, the member suggested, because at least with a later primary you are giving non-endorsees in gerrymandered districts more time to campaign.

**6. Advantages of a concentrated primary** —Wodele said a party with a vulnerable incumbent doesn't need a long primary season for challengers to mount a successful campaign in opposition. A short, highly-focused, energy-filled primary campaign can do the job.

**7. "Independent" voters can influence a party's primary election** —Wodele disputed a contention that far left or far right endorsees necessarily have an advantage in the primary elections. In Minnesota you need not be registered as a member of a given political party to be able to vote in that party's primary election, he noted. Thus, independent voters are free to enter primaries and vote for other candidates if they think party endorsees are too far to the left or right.

The discussion briefly centered on whether voters deliberately enter a party's primary with mischievous intent. Wodele said such voting might occur on the margins but evidence indicates that the vast majority are not deliberately voting cross-party to try to disrupt a party's process of picking its own nominee.

**8. Question of legislative support in 2008** —A member asked about prospects for action in 2008 on advancing the date of the primary. Wodele said it is possible that rather than concentrate on the

House, where support already is evident, the Council might first concentrate on the Senate, where more work needs to be done. Asked about support for the plan, Wodele repeated that the DFL, Republican, and Independence Parties are in support, plus the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce. There was some discussion about possible support from a group of legislators who call themselves the 20-20 group.

**9. Judicial selection issue not likely** —If the Council were to reach a consensus on changing the method of choosing judges, that issue could be added to its agenda. However, such a consensus is not likely. Wodele personally likes the present system. He trusts voters to reject judicial candidates who promise during campaigns to rule certain ways on cases or to otherwise politicize campaigns.

**10. Watching Minneapolis on IRV** —On the matter of instant runoff voting, or ranked voting, as it also is called, the informal sense in the Council is to observe Minneapolis' experience before getting into the issue. Wodele said some people have trouble understanding how IRV would work.

**11. Support for a presidential preference primary** —The Council has endorsed a presidential primary for Minnesota, but it is a lower tier issue for the Council than an early primary date. Wodele is intrigued by the possibility of regional primaries.

**12. But primaries must be "open"** —Wodele said the Council supports primaries that allow anyone to participate. Minnesota doesn't have a tradition of requiring people to declare public affiliation with a party as a condition for participation in a primary.

**13. No concern about legislative caucuses** —Wodele sees nothing wrong with political parties or legislative caucuses raising money for political candidates. Personally, he prefers that donors make their gifts directly to a candidate, rather than to another organization. It was noted that Sheila Kiscaden and others have raised questions with the Civic Caucus about excessive involvement of legislative caucuses in certain races. Wodele referred to one legislative race where the caucuses were heavily involved, but he said that the elected candidate is very independent and won't yield to pressure to support caucus positions because of having received financial support from the caucus.

**14. Redistricting not on the Council agenda** —Wodele said it is very difficult to change the process because of the self interest of the legislators, who are the only ones who can make a change. When necessary, courts intervene, and that is fine with Wodele. He noted that even "safe" districts aren't always safe. In a recent special election in Steve Sviggum's district, which, Wodele said, was designed to be safe for Republicans, Sviggum's GOP successor received only 53 percent of the vote, which indicates the district isn't all that safe after all.

**15. Poor public policy to write revenue guarantees into the constitution** —The Legislature ought to be making the revenue raising and spending decisions, rather than writing certain guarantees into the constitution, he said. He's sympathetic with the advocates for natural resources, who have been working so hard to have the state invest in clear air and clean water. He wishes elected officials could see the importance of taking aggressive action on something that is so vital to the state's future.

**16. Is citizenry less educated today on public policy?** —Turning to issues of the media, Wodele said that with the abundance of news-related outlets on cable television 24/7, plus all the websites one would think that the citizenry would better educated than it is. He cited surveys from the Pew

Research Center indicating that people know less today than the past. For example, in 1989, 74 percent of the people knew the name of the Vice President. In 2007, the percentage was 69 percent. The pattern was the same for several other national offices. The only exception was the Speaker of the House. In 1989, 14 percent knew the Speaker was Tom Foley; in 2007, 49 percent knew the Speaker was Nancy Pelosi.

Wodele said he is a big supporter of newspapers. They are not going away. When you take the total information system, newspapers still are dominant in the media. They have a greater range of readership than any other news outlet. Take, for example, the 35W bridge disaster, Wodele said. Who but the newspapers could have provided that coverage? You see the 10 o'clock news, but you can't wait for the paper the next morning. Large metro dailies have very little direct newspaper competition within their local area for local news. They should carve out that niche.

**17. Thanks** —On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne thanked Wodele 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.**