



Summary of Meeting with Robert J. Brown

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Friday, September 19, 2008

Guest speaker: Robert J. Brown, former state senator, professor emeritus of educational leadership, University of St. Thomas

Present: Verne C. Johnson, chair; David Broden, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland, and Tim McDonald

A. Context of the meeting —In light of Robert J. Brown's involvement in education and his experience as a state senator, in addition to his being a regular Civic Caucus participant, the Civic Caucus invited Brown to discuss two topics that have been on the Civic Caucus agenda, (1) the elections process in Minnesota and (2) education.

B. Welcome and introduction —Verne and Paul welcomed and introduced **Robert J. Brown**, professor emeritus of educational leadership, University of St. Thomas. Brown served 10 years in the Minnesota State Senate. He was State Chairman and later National Committeeman for the Minnesota Republican Party. His degrees: BS in math and speech, Winona State; M.A. and Ph.D. in educational administration and psychology, University of Minnesota.

Brown currently serves on the Minnesota State Board of Medical Practice, the Board of Advisers to the St. Thomas College of Applied Professional Studies, the Board of Directors for the Minnesota Association of Charter Schools, the Civic Education Committee for the Minnesota State Bar Association, and is a member of the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

Brown directs the St. Thomas National Youth Sports Program, an academic and sports summer camp that serves over 300 low income 10 to 16 year olds, over 80 per cent of whom are students of color.

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

1. Precinct caucuses-endorsements-nominations-elections —Brown said the process of selecting candidates who will represent their respective parties in the general election should involve as broad a group as possible from the parties. However, activists, who often representing narrow interests, dominate the process.

It's immensely difficult, he said, to keep a small group from controlling the selection of candidates. While the state has a legitimate interest in how the political parties conduct their business, the state can't, for example, require parties to endorse multiple candidates for the same office. Nor can the state require open primaries without endorsements. The state could discontinue the official role of precinct caucuses, but it can't prevent political parties from conducting such caucuses on their own.

2. Possibly use primary elections to elect party officers —It's possible, he said, to broaden public participation on selection of party officers. State law could require, as condition for official party recognition on the ballot, that party officers, from the precinct level on up, would have to stand for election in the primary. Such an action would prevent any narrow group from automatically taking control of a party, he said, although the ballot would be cluttered with names largely unknown to voters.

3. Lack of understanding about the purpose of precinct caucuses —The purpose of precinct caucuses isn't widely understood by members of the public, Brown said, as evidenced by caucuses that were held this year. In many precincts, people showed up to cast their preference votes for President and then left without sticking around for the caucus meetings.

4. Support for a presidential preference primary —Brown favors having Minnesota holding a presidential preference primary. Possibly, he said, precinct caucuses could occur the evening of the presidential preference primary. It's good to hold the precinct caucuses for all parties at the same time, he said, to keep people from attending more than one caucus. Brown said he is open to creative ways of producing broader precinct caucus attendance, such as allowing people to participate via the internet.

5. Advance the date of the primary election —Brown would advance the date of Minnesota's primary, now in September, to June, which would give the parties the summer months to do a better job of preparing for the intensive part of the campaign beginning in September.

6. Critical importance of civics education —The average student in other countries understands more about the political process in the USA than do students who live here, he said. We aren't doing an adequate job of informing our own citizens of the political process, so we shouldn't be surprised that general citizens participate at such low levels.

7. Opposition to ranked choice voting— A Civic Caucus member inquired whether using ranked choice voting, also known as Instant Runoff Voting (IRV), in primary elections would have the effect of increasing the influence of more people within the political party. Brown believes the concept of voting for only one person, without a second choice, is solidly ingrained in our political system. Moreover, he said, smart people can figure out how to influence the outcome even with ranked choice voting. (With ranked choice voting, the voter ranks candidates in order of preference, with the rankings used to choose a consensus candidate.)

8. Increase the importance of the party platform, relative to campaign fundraising —More grassroots involvement in the party might be possible if the political parties were to make platforms important, but today platform activity is overwhelmed by fundraising, he said. Theoretically, development of a party platform begins at the precinct caucus level, with the potential of broad citizen

participation. In years past the political side and the finance side of a party were separated, a Civic Caucus member said.

9. Problems in campaign finance —Brown is opposed to the vastly enlarged role of legislative caucuses in fundraising. (Legislative caucuses are the on-going organizations of the majority and minority members of the House and Senate, as opposed to the once-a-biennium grass-roots citizens meetings known as precinct caucuses.) House and Senate leaders are able to shake down lobbyists for major contributions to their caucuses, he said. There's no limit on contributions to the legislative caucuses, as contrasted with limits on direct contributions to candidates, he noted.

Brown is puzzled how the courts can hide behind the first amendment in upholding unlimited contributions. Protecting free speech doesn't seem to be related to how much money is given by organizations, he said.

One idea for change that appeals to Brown is to require that all contributions to a candidate must come from individuals living in the area where the candidate runs for office.

10. Proposals for campaign finance change —Brown favors immediate and full disclosure of all contributions to candidates, to candidate committees, to parties, and to independent committees working on behalf of candidates. Any campaign ad must include the name of someone, not just the organization.

11. Support for changing judiciary selection —In response to a question, Brown said he favors merit selection for judges, with retention elections, as proposed a commission headed by former Governor Al Quie.

12. Need for leadership by elected officials —A Civic Caucus member asked Brown why Minnesota elected officials today seem more interested in management of the state, not leadership. Brown replied that one reason is the dramatic change in the media. The print media provides far less in-depth reporting of issues today than in the past.

An outgrowth of the lack of leadership is the submission of issues directly to the voters. Brown opposes using

legislator proposed amendments which, he said, are a copout for legislative budget decisions (e.g, the current environmental

amendment). But he does favor initiative and referendum (with fairly difficult standards for getting such measures on the ballot)

as a citizen check on the Legislature.

13. Importance of change in education —The discussion shifted from the elections process to education. Citing problems with education of students in Minnesota, where some school systems have "imploded", Brown said the goal must be how to help children learn, not to protect the systems. He said he is a strong advocate for competition. Thus he is active in the charter schools movement. He also believes much more must be done with early childhood learning.

14. Provide advocates for children —Every child needs an advocate, either parents or others who can step in where parents aren't advocating on behalf of their children. Advocates can come from throughout the population, including youth and retired people. Advocates must come from sources that are comfortable for the families involved. Thus, they should come from neighborhood organizations where the families themselves participate or trust.

A Civic Caucus member said schools must make it easier for volunteers to come into the schools. Currently, many people feel they are unwelcome—at least partly because of security measures.

15. Contribution by Twin Cities Rise —During a discussion of the importance of student motivation in the learning process, a Civic Caucus member noted the great success of Twin Cities Rise, which helps prepare disadvantaged adults for employment by helping them become motivated.

16. Finding good leadership for civic and governmental affairs in the Twin Cities area —Brown recalled that 30-40 years ago many home-grown businesses were led by individuals who felt a strong personal stake in the future of the metropolitan area. The region is losing its uniqueness, Brown said. More needs to be done at the group vice president and CFO levels with the current group of business leaders.

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