



Summary of Meeting with Dee Long

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Friday, October 24, 2008

Guest speaker: Dee Long, former speaker, Minnesota House of Representatives

Present: Verne C. Johnson, chair; David Broden, Charles Clay, Marianne Curry, Paul Gilje (by phone), Jim Hetland, Marina Lyon, and Wayne Popham (by phone)

A. Context of the meeting —This is another in several meetings the Civic Caucus has been conducting on the question of the process of identifying, endorsing, and nominating candidates for public office, from the precinct caucuses through the primary election.

B. Welcome and introduction —Verne and Paul welcomed and introduced Dee Long, former speaker, Minnesota House of Representatives. Long was a member of the Minnesota House of Representatives from 1979 to 1999, where she served as Speaker of the House, House Majority Leader, House Tax Chair for two separate terms, and Chair of the Local Government Committee. She was the first woman to chair a Joint Legislative Commission, the first woman to chair the House Tax Committee, and the first woman to be elected Speaker. She is a magna cum laude graduate of the University of Minnesota, and completed all but a dissertation for a Ph.D. in experimental psychology with a minor in statistics at that institution. After retiring from the Legislature, Long was Director of the Environmental Tax and Incentives Program for Fresh Energy, a coalition of citizens and organizations working to promote efficiency in energy use and increased reliance on home-grown renewable energy.

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

1. Support for Growe commission recommendations —Long said she supports recommendations from a January 1995 report of a bipartisan legislative-citizen commission headed by Joan Growe, former Minnesota Secretary of State. The report may be found at: <http://archive.leg.state.mn.us/docs/2005/other/050564.pdf>. Key recommendations from the Growe report:

—Move precinct caucuses to the first weekend in April, during the day.

—Conduct a presidential primary by mail on the same day

—Advance the state primary to early August, on a Saturday or a Tuesday

- Require major party candidates for state and federal offices to receive at least 20 percent of the vote on any ballot at the party endorsing convention to obtain a place on the state primary election ballot.
- Identify endorsed candidates on the primary ballot.
- Rename the state primary the "party nominating election".

2. Problems with precinct caucuses today —Long supports retaining precinct caucuses but they shouldn't be mixed with a presidential preference vote, as they were in Minnesota in 2009. She highlighted her personal experience with waiting 45 minutes to get to her caucus, because of clogged roads, and turning around and going home, as many others did. Many people voted and left, she said, paying no attention to other precinct caucus business. Also, she said, the present system of selecting delegates at caucuses is so complicated and requires too many delegates and alternates, often more than stay around for the regular business of the evening. It's people with the greatest personal stake in the outcome, whether occupationally or because of strongly held views on selected topics who are most likely to attend, rather than rank and file party members.

If precinct caucuses are held during the day on a weekend, they're likely to attract more participants who aren't present simply to crusade for their favorite interest, she said. Years ago, she said, party members thought attending precinct caucuses was a civic responsibility, and they'd never fail to attend. A Civic Caucus member observed that changes in the role of the media might be part of the problem of declining involvement of people politically. Another member commented that it's tough to get people to attend meetings today, which partly explains the attraction of the Civic Caucus as a virtual organization, where people can be active without coming to a meeting.

A Civic Caucus member attended only one precinct caucus but won't return because being asked to commit to a position on a certain issue even before walking in the door.

Long supports multiple party endorsement, giving candidates who achieve a certain threshold at a party convention, say 30 percent support, the right to go on the ballot. Historically, she said, a party-endorsed candidate doesn't survive the primary.

While the Growe commission recommended late August for state primary elections, Long would like late June. She doesn't agree with legislators who oppose such a date because it would be so near the end of a legislative session.

3. Publish precinct caucus resolutions in advance? —Long likes the idea of publicizing online before a precinct caucus meeting occurs all resolutions to be voted on, along with pros and cons. There's really no opportunity to discuss resolutions in a precinct caucus meeting, she said.

4. Strong role for legislative caucus leadership is acceptable on legislative campaigns —While believing that candidates are best selected at the local level, Long has no problem with legislative caucuses playing a significant role in campaigns. They have a better pulse on what is going on, she believes. (Again, for clarification purposes, legislative caucuses are permanent organizations of the majority and minority in the House and Senate, as contrasted with precinct caucuses, grass-roots once-a-biennium community gatherings.)

The Legislature has passed laws to restrict the political activity of legislative caucuses to locations away from the Capitol, she said. You can find out online via the Campaign Finance Board where the money is coming from.

Long disagrees with those who contend that legislative caucus financial support makes candidates beholden to caucus leadership on major bills. Legislators vote their own feelings or those of their district whether they've received caucus support or not.

5. Better civics education would help —High school civics classes could do more, Long said, in exposing youth to political responsibility. She recalled disinterest on the part of social studies teachers at a high school in her district when she wanted to put on a bi-partisan discussion about political involvement.

6. Decline in bipartisan cooperation —Long said bipartisan cooperation in the Legislature declined over the 20 years she served in the Legislature. The success she observed early in gaining consensus among members with different party affiliation declined in years because of partisanship.

Asked why partisanship seemed to take precedence, she replied that people with more extreme views were getting elected. Also legislators increasingly were locking themselves in to vote in certain ways via pre-election surveys conducted by interest groups.

7. No support for an open primary —Long opposes an open primary, because candidates with a great deal of money could eclipse other candidates in the campaign. She advocates multiple endorsements for the same office.

8. Support for ranked choice voting —Long said she supports Instant Runoff Voting (IRV), by which voters rank candidates in order of preference to produce a winner with a majority of the vote.

9. No enthusiasm to return to non-partisan ballot —Although she acknowledged that city and county candidates run on a non-partisan ballot with no difficulty, Long would not favor returning to elections in which legislators ran on a non-partisan ballot. Even in those days (pre-1973), you still knew whether legislators would caucus with Conservatives or Liberals, she said. Leadership is needed, starting with the Governor, by people who are committed to bridging the partisan divide, she said.

10. Support for legislative redistricting commission —Long said she's supported transferring the responsibility for redistricting from the Legislature to a commission since 1980.

11. Separating the functions of raising money from candidate identification and support? —A Civic Caucus member said it appears that political party leadership formerly kept the finance side of the party separate from the political side. But the two have been merged, which seems to have increased the partisan divide. Long said that she never relied much on the DFL Party for financial support or other help in campaigns.

12. Opposition to a full time Legislature —It is important that legislators have an opportunity to hold other jobs besides serving in the Legislature, Long said. She would favor tighter limits on the length of the session, as necessary to preserve the part-time function.

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