



Former Minnesota Senator Dave Durenberger

Policymakers would benefit from more reports with recommendations

A Civic Caucus Focus on Competitiveness Interview

August 22, 2014

Present

John Adams, Dave Broden (vice chair), Janis Clay, Pat Davies, Dave Durenberger, Paul Gilje (coordinator), Randy Johnson, Dan Loritz (chair), Dana Schroeder, Clarence Shallbetter. By phone: Audrey Clay.

Background

Every week, readers offer their thoughts on Civic Caucus reports of interviews. A few months ago, former U.S. Senator Dave Durenberger, in addition to offering his comments on a Civic Caucus interview with officials of the University of Minnesota, raised questions about the Civic Caucus itself.

"What is the current role of the Civic Caucus?" he asked. "To determine what's on the minds of persons in leadership positions or serious policy thinkers about the present and future of our community? Or, to play a role via the conversations and online exchanges in coming to some conclusions which can be more widely communicated?"

The answer is both, Durenberger says in this interview. He believes the Civic Caucus should continue interviewing policy leaders and also issue reports with its own conclusions, such as [the recent Civic Caucus report on human capital](#).

The following notes summarize a discussion with Durenberger about the current environment in which the Civic Caucus conducts its weekly policy conversations.

Summary

Former U.S. Senator Dave Durenberger believes people in local public leadership positions today are as qualified or better qualified than people who held those positions 40 or 50 years ago. He does not believe the same to be true of elected officials at the state and national levels, because of ideological partisan politics, perennial elections and campaign financing.

He asserts that some of the institutional arrangements created in Minnesota in the 1960s and 1970s aren't working as well 40 or 50 years later. The Civic Caucus has an experienced membership, he says, who owe it to today's local leaders to help make these institutions function more effectively in what is now a different world.

Durenberger says the Civic Caucus fulfills an important educational role by broadly distributing summaries of the discussions it convenes with people with ideas on important public policy issues. It's also important, he believes, for the Civic Caucus to put out reports with policy recommendations. But Civic Caucus members, he says, could also make a difference by using the instincts, expertise and wisdom of their years of public-policy experience to inform and mentor people currently in local and state public office.

He contends that passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) might bring a greater focus on the importance of strong local government in creating healthy communities, with its goal of reducing the 40 percent of health care costs that lie in the social determinants of health.

Biography

Dave Durenberger, former U.S. Senator from Minnesota, recently retired as Senior Health Policy Fellow at the University of St. Thomas and as chair of the National Institute of Health Policy, which he founded there in 1998.

Durenberger served in the Senate from November 1978 to January 1995. He was first elected in a special election in November 1978 to complete the unexpired term of the late Sen. Hubert Humphrey, whose position had temporarily been filled by Humphrey's wife, Muriel. Durenberger was reelected in 1982 and 1988. During his time in the Senate, he served as chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence, the Health Subcommittee of the Senate Finance Committee, and the Intergovernmental Relations Subcommittee.

Prior to his election to the Senate, he served in the U.S. Army as an officer in Military Intelligence and as a reserve Civil Affairs and Military Government officer. He practiced law in South St. Paul with Harold LeVander and served as his chief of staff when LeVander served as governor from 1967 to 1971. From 1971 to 1978, he was counsel for Legal and Community Affairs at the H.B. Fuller Company in St. Paul.

He is author of *Prescription for Change* and *Neither Madmen Nor Messiahs* and teaches and speaks nationally on the future of health-care delivery and policy. He has a B.A. in political science, history and English from St. John's University in Collegeville, Minn., and a J.D. from the University of Minnesota School of Law.

Discussion

The policymaking process is grievously disconnected today. The problem, Durenberger said, is the prominence of money and the U.S. Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision that the **First Amendment** prohibits the government from restricting **independent political expenditures** by **corporations**, labor unions and other associations.

"Today," he said, "if you run a business and you make a lot of money and then run for public office, other people who make a lot of money are going to give their money to your campaign, because they know you'll put your own money into the campaign, if it looks like you're going to lose. There's not much we can do about that one."

People in local public leadership positions today are as qualified or better qualified than people who were in those positions 40 or 50 years ago. Durenberger said he sees those qualifications in the gender, preparation, experience, motivation and political independence of people in elected and appointed local government positions today. He believes they are probably better qualified today to take on the kind of challenges they face than those of us who were in those positions back then.

Durenberger does not share this opinion about people in elected positions at the state and national level, where "ideological partisan politics, perennial elections, and campaign financing have destroyed both the power of the informed citizen and that citizen's ability to be elected to state or national office from anything but the extremes."

An interviewer disagreed with Durenberger's assertion that leaders today are better prepared. The interviewer said he thinks it's just the opposite. He had spoken recently to a group of 150 Teach for America corps members, who are working in the Twin Cities to help prepare high school students for college. He said only a few of the corps members had taken college courses in 20th-century world history or late 20th-century U.S. history and none had studied the cultural geography of the U.S.

"How will we help high school students learn to confront the world today if the people teaching them don't know how the world works?" the interviewer asked. Young people need to learn how to get involved to make a difference, he said, but many of their professors are careerists and are not necessarily involved in groups like the Citizens League.

"Fifty years ago," the interviewer continued, "the things people knew and the things they needed to know to be effective, coupled with the value system they brought to their public-policy involvement, were different from today." He believes young people today don't know how things work. "They don't know what they need to know, compared with the challenges of today's complicated world," he said.

The interviewer claimed that value systems are different today. He pointed out that Donald Dayton (former CEO of Dayton's) made time to be heavily involved in public policy because he thought it was important and thought private business and public business are the same.

We all have a shared heritage in civic activity. Durenberger said back in the 1960s and 1970s, the reformers in the Legislature came to the table with something to talk about, because many had a background with reports from the Citizens League and other organizations. "There is something special about all of us who got tutored into public policymaking through the Citizens League," he said.

Some of the institutional arrangements in Minnesota that were created in the 1960s and 1970s, many by the efforts of Citizens League members, don't appear to be working as well 40 or 50 years later. The world is different now, Durenberger said, after 40 or 50 years of increased national and state financing and regulatory pressure on many of the local government institutions that implement critical public policy.

"At the federal level, the progressive conservatives saw the problems of civil rights and gender bias and we did something about it," he said. "We made the difference between the Democrats and the Republicans. We did it with the environmental issues and all the water issues. We just kept loading this stuff on."

"The conservatives didn't want the national government doing this stuff," he continued, "so we said the states should pick up the ball." But, Durenberger said, the federal government didn't follow through with the necessary funding.

"The progressive conservatives are part of the problem," he said. "We did create a lot of these institutions. We were meeting a challenge of how you get more people involved and how you have a better outcome at the end."

The Civic Caucus has an experienced membership who could be resources to assist in systems change in these institutions. "We who created the Metropolitan Council, Fiscal Disparities, etc., owe to today's local leaders help in making the institutional arrangements we helped create function more effectively to empower community leadership," Durenberger said.

The Civic Caucus serves an important role by providing a forum for people with ideas on improved governance, policy formulation and policy implementation. These discussions help educate others through distribution of the discussion summaries to a broad e-mail audience, Durenberger said. Those online participants, he believes, can help give some sense of the value and priority to the community of the ideas discussed in the forums.

It's important for the Civic Caucus to put out reports. An interviewer asked Durenberger how important it is for the Civic Caucus to put out reports with recommendations and what the frequency of such reports should be. The interviewer noted that the great strength of many reports from civic organizations is that they actually propose something. Durenberger responded that he thinks it's important, but the Caucus should take on this broader role of mentoring, as well, and not spend a whole year putting together a report.

Civic organizations help bring people together in a common effort, an interviewer said. He cited successful Citizens League reports on setting up institutions and on dealing with tax and finance issues, especially the property tax.

But people involved in the Civic Caucus could also make a difference by mentoring people in local and state public office. Durenberger said people with years of public-policy experience could "take all the instincts, the expertise and the wisdom we collectively have generated over time and commit that to informing and mentoring people in local and state public office. We'd make quite a difference. It would help policymakers confront the opportunity to change the role of government."

Passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) might provide an opportunity to focus again on governance at the local level and on the difficulty of meeting community needs through metropolitan, state or national governments. Durenberger said the ACA focuses on systemic institutional and professional reform, with an "essential focus" on reducing the cost consequences of the social determinants of poor health and safety, such as poverty, immigration, housing, education, health care, mental health and addiction.

"Having healthy communities is critical, since 40 percent of the costs of health care lie in the social determinants of health," he said.

One role of government is to make choices possible, but not to dictate them.

The federal government's role in K-12 education should be simply financing part of the costs and redirecting financing to follow the reform. Durenberger said the federal government has a legitimate role in education, because without its involvement, "one-third of the states would stick it to the poor and the voiceless." But education should be mostly done by the local community, with the help of the state, he said.

Minnesota has many resources to draw on to come up with good ideas. An interviewer commented that creative proposals from civic organizations aren't the final word. Those proposals stimulate others to come up with their own. The interviewer recounted that when the Citizens League came up with the idea of the Metropolitan Council, a legislator quickly came up with a slightly different proposal that was enacted into law. The Citizens League proposal became the stimulus for legislative action. The interviewer said more organizations must recognize how important it is for them to generate ideas, to get the debate going, even though their own ideas won't necessarily be enacted exactly as advanced.

It's important to think ahead to try to do something for the collective good. Durenberger said we need to seize opportunities to better inform those who are in office now and to challenge them to think differently. An interviewer commented that we currently have an outstanding Legislature, which could be working on solutions to issues like pollution, the water supply, experimentation with solar and wind energy, changing the electrical grid, and judicial elections. "But legislators are not creators of ideas," the interviewer said. "We must give them ideas on a silver platter."

Another interviewer commented that **Verne Johnson**, founder of the Civic Caucus, once advised him that generalized objectives won't get us anywhere; we need specific action that will effectively achieve what we want to achieve.