



Steve Kelley of the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs

Stimulate innovation to help solve Minnesota's pressing problems

A Civic Caucus Review of Minnesota's Public Policy Process Interview

December 11, 2015

Present

John Adams, Steve Anderson, David Broden (phone), Janis Clay (phone), Paul Gilje (executive director), Randy Johnson (phone) Steve Kelley, Sallie Kemper (associate director), Dan Loritz (chair), Paul Ostrow, Bill Rudelius, Dana Schroeder (associate director), Clarence Shallbetter

Summary

Former legislator Steve Kelley offered several suggestions for producing more innovation in solving Minnesota's pressing public policy problems: enact proposals that serve an entire population, rather than only targeting groups in greatest need; involve advocacy groups, but don't let them dominate. Look beyond the state's borders for good ideas; encourage Minnesota's colleges and universities to balance their research on international and national problems with research on problems specific to Minnesota; urge the Minnesota House and Senate to create more joint House-Senate commissions to stimulate lawmakers to work together earlier, possibly making consensus more likely; enact ranked choice voting, giving candidates incentives to take positions that appeal to broader segments of the population.

Biography

Steve Kelley is a senior fellow at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota. His expertise includes green chemistry policy; innovation policy; public budgeting; science and technology policy; science, technology, engineering and mathematics education policy; telecommunications and information technology issues.

He served in the Minnesota Senate from January 1997 through December 2006 and the Minnesota House of Representatives from January 1993 through December 1996. He was chair of the Senate Education Committee for four years. During his service as a legislator, Kelley served on the Executive Committee of the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) and co-chaired its task force on the No Child Left Behind Act.

Before his legislative service, he was a public member of the Minnesota Board of Medical Practice from 1984 to 1992 and served one year as its president. Aside from his public service, Kelley practiced commercial litigation at the Minneapolis firm of Mackall, Crounse, and Moore PLC for over 20 years.

Kelley received his B.A. from Williams College graduating cum laude in 1975 and later earned his J.D. from the Columbia University School of Law in 1978.

Background

Today's interview is part of the Civic Caucus review of institutions of public policy in Minnesota. Such institutions include academic schools, foundations that finance efforts to develop proposals for change, media, and voluntary public policy organizations, including the Civic Caucus. Kelley was invited to meet with Civic Caucus because as a legislator he was always in need of quality proposals to address public problems and now in academic world he is involved in making such proposals.

Discussion

Address the barriers to innovation. Kelley began his remarks by highlighting what he considers barriers to innovation in Minnesota public policy action today. One is intransigence of interest groups in being open to proposals other than their own, a new orthodoxy in thinking. Another is a feeling that solutions involving government are inherently inferior to solutions in the private sector. A third barrier is an increased emphasis on individualism as against consensus-building.

Using the issue of early childhood as an example of the new orthodoxy, Kelley noted that in the 2015 Minnesota Legislature certain interest groups that were supporting scholarships for low income families insisted on their approach, rather than universal pre-kindergarten for all children. The universal approach was treated as illegitimate despite the existence of reasonable alternative arguments. For many, the universal approach is better because it reminds everyone that we'll all in this together, collectively and because pre-kindergarten benefits all children, not just low income.

Recognize that industry stakeholders must be involved, but not dominate the discussion.

Kelley referred to an interview the Civic Caucus had with [Sean Kershaw](#), executive director of the Citizens League, a few weeks ago. The question involved how, in discussing public policy problems and solutions, to give a voice to advocacy groups without giving them undue influence in the outcome, and at the same time to assure critical leadership of the general-purpose citizen members. The question isn't whether advocacy groups should be involved, he said, the question is how and when they should be involved.

Kelley recalled that he came face to face with the question of potential undue influence by industry stakeholders in telecommunications when he chaired the Citizens League Program Committee in 1988-1989. Changes successfully opposed by the industry at that time ultimately have become the reality today. He recounted another more recent experience of undue influence of stakeholders in battling an environmental lobby that was trying to block action on toxic chemicals.

Look elsewhere for good ideas. Kelley cited examples of innovative legislative action that occurred after legislators picked up good ideas in trips to other states and countries. Minnesota would gain by looking more at successful innovation in states like Oregon and Colorado, he said. Looking at in-state sources, he praised the Center for Innovation at Mayo Clinic in Rochester that, rather than concentrating only on research, has come up with ways to deliver health care better, including protecting safety of patients and lowering expenses while maintaining quality.

Kelley cited the [Stanford University d.school](#) as an effort to stimulate innovation among its students. Stanford states it provides students with a methodology that combines creative and analytical approaches and requires collaboration across disciplines. The Stanford effort parallels the [School of Design Thinking](#) at the Hasso Plattner University in Potsdam, Germany, he said.

Relate a university's work to real problems in the state. An interviewer inquired whether there are many examples of schools at the University of Minnesota that are involved in researching and studying current problems that need action by the state. The interviewer cited an example of a university school whose students are receiving degrees in areas related to the state's economy where none of the school's research over the last five years seems to have been related to specific current problems in Minnesota.

Kelley replied that there's a very specific tie-in between research by the Center for Sustainable Polymers of the University of Minnesota's College of Science and Engineering and other groups focused on protection of Minnesota's lakes and rivers.

Earmarked dollars influence the University of Minnesota's research agenda . The Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota has 40 faculty members, all of whom have their own major fields of interest and funding sources, Kelley said. Thus the interest of the funding sources play a major role in setting priorities for problems within the state, as well as problems with national and international interest. The Minnesota Legislature earmarks dollars for the University of Minnesota to take on selected research projects that the Legislature identifies as high priority, he said. An interviewer wondered whether the University of Minnesota is taking the initiative and submitting requests for funding to the Legislature, accompanied by a priority list of urgent state problems that need attention.

In the continuing discussion on this point, Kelley acknowledged in response to a question that the Humphrey School recently has given more emphasis to international and national issues than to state issues. To illustrate the global emphasis, Kelley highlighted the [Grand Challenges Curriculum](#) of the University of Minnesota that addresses issues ranging from fracking to global hunger to reconciliation and justice. Eight courses have been approved for Spring 2016 on issues including disease, rivers and cities, climate change, and structural violence. An interviewer suggested it might be helpful to interview a university leader about where Minnesota problems fit in this Grand Challenge Curriculum.

Getting action on public problems by elected officials. An interviewer wondered whether implementing innovative solutions to public problems is disconnected from the process of coming up with proposed solutions. The interviewer speculated that polarization among elected officials could be a factor. Or, the interviewer suggested that public policy discussion today seems to resemble litigation, not consensus seeking. One interest group has one set of "clients" and another group, another set of clients, neither of which is seeking consensus.

Benefit of ranked choice voting. Kelley said he is a supporter of ranked choice voting because it has the effect of stimulating candidates to appeal to a broader group of voters than only a narrow constituency. With ranked choice voting a candidate needs to attract at least a majority of votes, not just a plurality. Thus candidates should be more inclined to support proposals that represent consensus, rather than extreme positions to the left or right.

Benefit of joint legislative committees. Kelley said it appears that joint committees of the Minnesota House and Senate are more a rarity today than in the past, which contributes to polarization. Joint committees could work on problem solving together, he said, which increases the likelihood that an innovative idea will get serious consideration by both legislative bodies. Opportunities for these joint committees to travel to look at issues could also help build bridges.

Taking advantage of technology to make public policy changes. An interviewer noted that some educational changes don't require any legislative action, just the decision to take advantage of them. The interviewer cited help available to students, parents and teachers via [Khan Academy](#). But the interviewer wondered whether some teachers lack the knowledge or ability to take advantage of Khan. Kelley replied that he questions how relevant Khan can be to the one-third or more of students who have significant learning barriers. As the discussion on technology continued, Kelley questioned the value of MOOCs, massive open online courses, because so few enrollees complete their courses. "We need to remember that motivation is a big part of educational success," Kelley said.

As the discussion continued about teachers' use of technology, Kelley mentioned a conversation he just had with a school principal who related how delighted his teachers were with the new I-pads that their students had been given.

Selecting topics for PhD dissertations that are relevant to the state. An interviewer noted that PhD candidates devote endless hours in research on their dissertations, but it seems as that many are on exotic topics that seem to bear slight relevance to problems facing the state. Would it not be better, the interviewer suggested, for the faculty of University of Minnesota schools to play a stronger role in advising PhD candidates on possible topics? The University is a land-grant institution, with a clear responsibility to helping the state, the interviewer said. Why not at least make sure the directors, deans and professors are fully aware of the high-priority problems the state faces as part of advising their students of possible topics for PhDs?

Importance of strengthening institutions of public policy in Minnesota. An interviewer pointed out that the Civic Caucus has chosen to emphasize in its interviews the roles of institutions of public policy including media, foundations, post-secondary education, think tanks, and other civic organizations. We're looking at how they functioned in the past, are functioning today, and what their functions should be in the future. Today's interview is part of the process.

Need for independent, general purpose, citizen-based organizations offering specific, actionable proposals . An interviewer suggested that successful innovation in public policy in the past would suggest that what is needed today are more general purpose public policy groups that are independent, unaffiliated with advocacy bodies, open to any topic of public concern, not concentrating on one area only, and truly citizen-based, involving interested individuals, not just professionals in various fields. Such groups would produce recommendations that are immediately actionable, not vague expressions of hope for change.

Kelley replied that a big problem today is the fact that too many organizations are dependent upon contributions from wealthy individuals whose own views are reflected in proposals from such organizations.

Successful grass roots effort on gay marriage amendment . One of the outstanding and astounding examples of grassroots citizen impact is that of the gay rights movement in Minnesota, Kelley said. First the movement was faced with a state constitutional amendment that would have banned gay marriage. So that amendment had to be defeated, which it was. Then, probably more astounding was that the group was able to get a law passed that specifically allowed gay marriage. Moreover, all this was accomplished in a relatively short time.

Importance of rural-metro cooperation. It's fine to work for ways to strengthen the metro area, Kelley said, but what is really important for positive action is a solidarity among all parts of the state. "Don't just think of the non-metro area as providing the food and energy for the metro folks. We need a rural innovation strategy, too."