



Minnesota State Senator Tom Bakk

Most ideas at Legislature come from outside

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

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Present

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Summary

According to Minnesota State Senator Tom Bakk, protecting the integrity of the Legislature as an institution is a high priority. He says legislators should act to keep people's trust in their state government, especially since so many people have lost faith in the Federal government. Decorum, especially that practiced in the Senate, helps the public maintain respect for the Legislature, he believes. He maintains that a citizen Legislature is important, so that legislators are not only career politicians.

Bakk says that consideration by the Legislature of major policy issues starts with a study or report and that most legislative ideas come from outside the Legislature. He mentions the importance of studies by the Legislative Auditor, the University of Minnesota and special state commissions. He advises individuals or groups doing studies and bringing proposals to the Legislature to make a case and show there's some value to the new proposals, since every dollar to be spent is in competition with other spending. He says it's important for groups to find a legislative champion for their proposals who has a passion for the subject area involved. Someone has to write a bill, he says, so there can be public testimony. He asserts that a good idea without a constituency is not going to go anywhere.

He states that groups that are organized and know how to communicate with the Legislature are incredibly effective with legislators, giving the Minnesota United Snowmobilers Association and the electric co-ops as examples. To be effective, Bakk notes, people need to build organizations that touch a lot of members.

Bakk believes omnibus bills at the Legislature are important, but they should be limited to finance and not include policy provisions. He also speaks about pre-K education (keep the scholarship program

for low-income students, but don't move to universal pre-K); K-12 school testing (all the money goes to the subjects in which students are tested); teacher salaries (they're too low); and the future of the Metropolitan Council (it might not survive).

Biography

Minnesota Senator Tom Bakk (DFL-Cook) is Senate Minority Leader-elect for the 2017 Minnesota Legislature. He represents all or portions of Cook, Koochiching, Lake and St. Louis Counties in northeastern Minnesota. From 1995 to 2003, he served in the Minnesota House. He has served in the Minnesota Senate since 2003.

Bakk served as Senate Majority Leader during the 2013-2014 and 2015-2016 legislative sessions and as Senate Minority Leader during the 2011-2012 session. His special legislative concerns are economic development, taxes and natural resources.

A retired labor representative, Bakk has an associate of arts degree from Mesabi Community College and two bachelor's degrees, one in business administration and one in labor-management relations, both from the University of Minnesota-Duluth.

Background

Since September 2015, the Civic Caucus has been undertaking a review of the quality of Minnesota's past, present and future public-policy process for anticipating, defining and resolving major community problems. On Nov. 10, 2016, the Caucus issued its report based on that review,  *Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: Strengthening Minnesota's Public-Policy Process*. The Civic Caucus interviewed Minnesota Senator Tom Bakk to get his views on how public policy is formulated in the Legislature and on what he believes the role of the Civic Caucus should be.

Discussion

E-mail has become less and less effective as a way to contact a legislator. Minnesota Senator Tom Bakk said the best way by far to contact a legislator is to write a handwritten letter. He said he manages his own e-mail, so he doesn't receive the mass e-mails that are sent to every legislator at once.

Protecting the integrity of the Legislature as an institution is a priority. Bakk said that is a major priority for him moving forward. "The Legislature is a place way bigger than anybody," he said.

Bakk commented that he tells freshmen legislators that after they leave the Legislature, no one is going to remember them. "You won't get remembered for what you did," he advises them. "But you will be remembered for how you treated people." He also says they should act to keep people's trust in their government, especially since so many people have lost faith in the Federal government. "I don't want to have people think of our State Capitol that way," he said

He believes that decorum is important and affects how the public sees the Legislature. He noted ways that decorum in the State Senate is different from that in the House:

- Male senators must wear suit jackets and ties when on the floor. Female senators also have a dress code, but it's not specific as to articles of clothing.
- Everyone must speak to the president of the Senate, not to the individual a senator is trying to address.
- The Senate doesn't allow photographs to be taken on the floor when in session, but the House does.

"The decorum in the Senate helps the public maintain respect for the institution," Bakk said.

He believes in a citizen Legislature so that legislators are not only career politicians. And he commented on the importance of legislative staff members, since they have the institutional memory and they interact with constituents.

Education is another high priority. Bakk said that because he has seven grandchildren, he thinks more about education than anything else. "Young minds are like sponges," he said.

He's skeptical of Governor Mark Dayton's universal pre-K proposals. "I'm not sure four-year-olds are ready for full-day school," he said. "Some are, but some aren't." Bakk said the current policy of providing scholarships for early childhood is different from providing universal preschool. "The scholarships are helping poor families and kids in poverty," he said. "They're providing additional help to them."

Consideration of major policy issues starts with a study or report. Bakk made that statement when an interviewer noted that a task force appointed by the governor has issued a report on mental health. Bakk mentioned the importance of studies done by the Legislative Auditor, the University of Minnesota and special state commissions.

He stated that in the budget, every dollar to be spent is in competition with other spending. "New things compete with current spending," he said. "You must show there's some value to new proposals. You must be able to make a case."

Bakk said it's important to plant ideas in the minds of other people. Then you can put someone else on the stage to carry the idea forward. As an example, he said he went to Senator Susan Kent (DFL-Woodbury) about improving the ratio of school counselors to students. He said Minnesota ranked 49th or 50th in the nation on that ratio. "Not all parents expose kids to careers, so where's the counselor?" Bakk asked. Kent then successfully carried the proposal for increasing the number of counselors by creating cost sharing with school districts: the state would pay part of the cost and the school district would pay part.

The state budget forecast is very important. Bakk said the governor will build his budget based on the Dec. 2, 2016, budget forecast of a \$1.4 billion surplus. The next forecast, on March 1, 2017, will affect the governor's supplemental budget.

According to Bakk, Senator Paul Gazelka (R-Nisswa), the incoming Senate Majority Leader, will focus on tax cuts. "They're very popular," Bakk said. "But what do they do to the state's quality of life?"

Groups that are organized are incredibly effective at the Legislature. Bakk gave the example of the Minnesota United Snowmobilers Association as a very well organized group. "No one's going to mess with them," he said. An interviewer commented that groups like that represent special interests. He asked Bakk about how well organizations do who don't have "a dog in the fight."

Bakk stated that the electric co-ops are the most effective organizations around the Legislature. "They are grass roots, since the people own them," he said. "They're very effective about communicating with the Legislature. They're incredibly powerful here." To be effective, you need to build organizations that touch a lot of members, he said.

An interviewer asked what kind of legitimacy the Legislature gives outside, non-special-interest groups. "Finding a legislative champion is important," Bakk responded, "especially one who's going to be here for awhile. Someone has to write a bill. It must be a bill with a number, so we can have public testimony. A good idea without a constituency is not going to go anywhere." He said most ideas in the Legislature come from somewhere else, including legislators' constituents.

Bakk tells new legislators to choose the committees they'd like to serve on by picking something in which they're interested. He advises them to develop expertise in certain subject areas. "People get developed on certain paths," he said. "If you're looking for legislators to back a proposal, find those who have a passion for that subject area. Don't necessarily pick your own legislators."

It's not clear the Metropolitan Council will survive. Bakk gave that response to an interviewer who noted considerable changes in the Council over the years since its inception as a regional council for waste disposal. "Is it an arm of the governor or should cities pick its members?" Bakk asked. "I side with the governor making appointments to the Council because that introduces stability. Some people coming out of cities have narrow interests."

Another interviewer commented that when the Metro Council was created in the late 1960s, its job was to look to the future and to how things fit together. "When you eliminate an organization that forces people to think about the future, everything degenerates into the here and now," the interviewer asserted. "This state was built by people who invested in the future. How do we keep in mind the future? How do we identify ideas so that 25 years from now, we'll be proud of what we've done?"

"People are getting the government they deserve," Bakk responded. "Tax cuts are popular, but they're not leading us forward." He said transportation is one of the biggest issues facing the state and he believes light-rail transit (LRT) is an investment in the next generation. "Legislators have fought like dogs about the Southwest LRT line," he said.

Another interviewer commented that landowners should put more into the pot paying for LRT. Bakk said the Green Line LRT shouldn't take an hour to get from St. Paul to Minneapolis, but all the property owners along the way felt their businesses were going to be passed by if there weren't more stops. "That's what happened, instead of a larger vision," he said.

Perhaps the Civic Caucus should create chapters around the state. Bakk made that suggestion in response to an interviewer's question about what the role of the Civic Caucus should be. Bakk said it's a lot of work to create chapters, but it gives more of a statewide perspective and perception.

The interviewer said the Civic Caucus does what it can in terms of making the group a statewide organization. Bakk responded that people will put more energy into the organization when they have more ownership of it. The Caucus should look for ways to make it more localized, he said.

We've probably gone backwards in education, most likely because of testing. Bakk gave that response to an interviewer's question about how the University of Minnesota and Minnesota State Colleges and Universities are connected to what goes on in K-12 public education. "All the money in K-12 education goes to things they're going to test in," Bakk said.

Noting that he's been a carpenter for 40 years, Bakk said there are lots of blue-collar occupations that kids need to be exposed to, but industrial arts classes have been dropped in most high schools. "We need to make sure we're preparing kids for educational opportunities in all fields," he said.

Bakk believes we don't pay teachers enough. "It doesn't make teaching very attractive," he said. "We have significant labor shortages coming in this country. Will we always be able to attract the best and the brightest into teaching? Money does matter."

"We've asked teachers to do more than ever before," Bakk continued. "The quality of teachers is very important. I'm very, very concerned about that. I believe we should have higher pay and a longer school year. Our future depends on the quality of education. We've always been pretty good about that."

Although Minnesota doesn't have a good climate and is far away from many things, Bakk said our Fortune 500 companies have been incredibly successful here. He noted that the big companies are very important, because they buy lots of things from Minnesota vendors. "They've been successful because of our labor force," he said of the large companies.

Take a go-slow approach to education reform. An interviewer asked how receptive the Legislature is to "innovative and imaginative" educational policy proposals that would make Minnesota a national model. "The pendulum has swung significantly," Bakk responded. "It's no secret that the Democratic caucuses have been aligned with Education Minnesota (the statewide teachers' union); the Republicans less so. So, the reformers have a much larger seat at the table right now."

"My word of caution," Bakk continued, "is that change for the sake of change comes with a great deal of uncertainty. I think you need to be careful. If reforms are going to come forward, I think it's OK for them to start small. Then see what the outcomes are. If they're worth doing, any major initiatives will go through a number of revisions over the years. It's unusual for something big to pass where all the bugs are worked out, because there are always some unintended consequences or something you didn't anticipate."

"If we're going to go down that reform road, I would urge some caution so people don't try to hit a homerun," Bakk said. "Our educational system is critically important to our future. We've been pretty good. Certainly, we can be better. I would argue a go-slow approach on reform, rather than tipping everything on its head."

Bakk said there will be a significant effort this legislative session toward tuition tax credits or some kind of private-school vouchers. "That will play out big at the end of the game with the governor," he said, "but I don't know how it will play out."

Omnibus bills are very important, but should not include policy. Bakk believes in the importance of omnibus bills and said it could be harmful if legislators broke the tax bill, for example, into four parts. "We must narrow the opportunities for the minority to govern," he said.

(An omnibus bill is a single document that is accepted in a single vote by the Legislature, but packages together several measures into one or combines diverse subjects. Opponents of omnibus bills say because of their large size and scope, omnibus bills limit opportunities for debate and scrutiny.)

"The problem with omnibus bills," Bakk said, "is that, especially in the House, people like to hook things onto the bills. It's a lazy tactic." He believes policy provisions should not be part of omnibus bills. "Just keep them on finance," he said. "The way it is now, people trade policy for money. It's a terrible shell game. The omnibus bills are important for dealing with the budget, but should not include policy."

Which foundations are respected throughout the state? In response to this question, Bakk named two in northern Minnesota: Northland Foundation in Duluth and the Blandin Foundation in Grand Rapids.