



Minnesota State Senator David Hann

To solve many public problems, devise solutions that don't involve government

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

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Present

Steve Anderson, Janis Clay, Paul Gilje (executive director), Sen. David Hann, Ted Kolderie, Dan Loritz (chair), Dana Schroeder (associate director), Clarence Shallbetter. By phone: Steve Alderson, Dave Broden (vice chair), Paul Ostrow.

Summary

Not every problem needs a legislative solution, Minnesota State Senator David Hann, minority leader of the State Senate asserts. The Legislature, he says, should not be involved in trying to resolve every problem in the state. He advises that in putting together good proposals for solving public problems, people of goodwill should devise solutions that don't involve government.

He decries the growing trend of diminishing the role of local government officials, who now feel many decisions belong to a higher level of government, whether state or federal. He is also distressed by the Federal Government preempting the role of state government, especially in the areas of health care and education. Hann believes some of these federal intrusions are unconstitutional, since the federal role should be restricted to those areas mentioned in the U.S. Constitution. He points out that neither education nor health care is mentioned there.

Hann addresses issues in education, special education and transportation, examining who the policymakers should be in those areas and what the proper role is for the Legislature.

He asserts that the political divide in the country is as serious as the divide before the Civil War. He claims that Democrats and Republicans have very different views on the fundamental issues raised in the Preamble to the Declaration of Independence and says those are at the root of the parties' inability to find common ground on a number of issues.

Biography

Minnesota State Senator David Hann (R-Eden Prairie) has been a member of the State Senate since 2003. He is minority leader of the State Senate, a position he has held since 2013. He served as assistant majority leader of the Senate from January 2011 through December 2011. He serves on the Senate Rules and Administration committee. He has been chair of the Senate Health and Human Services Committee and also served on the Senate Education and Finance Committees. He is a former member of the Eden Prairie School Board, where he served as clerk and treasurer.

Hann was born and raised in Minneapolis. He attended Lincoln High School in Bloomington and then served in the United States Army during the Vietnam War. He attended Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minn., earning a B.A. in religion, and undertook graduate studies in theology at the University of Chicago. He is a business process consultant. He formerly was director of forecasting and logistics for E.A. Sween Company, also known as Deli Express, in Eden Prairie.

Background

The Civic Caucus is undertaking a review of the quality of Minnesota's past, present and future public-policy process for anticipating, defining and resolving major public problems. The Caucus interviewed Minnesota State Senator David Hann to get his assessment of the state of that public-policy process and the relationship of the Legislature to the process.

Discussion

Not every problem needs a legislative solution. Minnesota Senator David Hann said the Legislature should not be involved in trying to resolve every problem in the state. He recalled his service on the Eden Prairie School Board. In years past, local officials made many more decisions, but there's been a growing trend to diminish that role. It is unfortunate, because so many local officials now feel that making certain decisions no longer is their job, but that of a higher level of government. That trend is in conflict with our commitment to be a self-governing nation.

Hann's comments were followed up by a question from Ted Kolderie, who quoted Harvard's Susan Moore Johnson about "the larger community represented by government." Such a comment, Kolderie said, would have been repugnant to former Humphrey School of Public Affairs Dean and Professor John Brandl, who always characterized government as a subset of the community, not the other way around.

To illustrate his concern about local issues being unnecessarily preempted by higher levels of government, Hann referred to anti-bullying laws. It is better, he said, for every school district to have its own anti-bullying policies, rather than having a statewide law or regulation imposed on all school districts. The locally developed policies would better meet the expectations of local citizens.

Moreover, he said, it is distressing to see the Federal Government preempting the role of state government. "Now much of the work of state legislatures is being done by the Federal Government," he said. He noted that is especially true in the area of health care. "There are very few things the state can do in health care anymore."

We should help society become more self-governed. Hann said instead of solving problems in the community, people are protesting and forming nonprofit groups that are coming to the Legislature for money. "That's a trend that should be examined," he said. "Is that really how we want to be governed?"

We should allow people to pursue their lives by their own lights. An interviewer asked whether Hann considered it a major issue that there are racial, economic and educational inequalities facing citizens of Minnesota. "We don't spread the great Minnesota experience to all of our citizens," the interviewer said.

In response, Hann said, "Our goal is to make sure there is equal opportunity for all. But some people have more talents than others; some are more motivated to achieve. This means people will make different choices and obtain different results. The fact that people are not the same is a great gift to society. I don't think the purpose of our government is to make people the same."

There are many things state governments are tasked to do and very few things the Federal Government is supposed to do. Hann said the Federal Government has gone beyond that. "I think it routinely acts unconstitutionally," he said. He pointed out that everything not specified in the Constitution as a federal responsibility is a state or individual responsibility. Education and health care, for example, are not in the Constitution as federal issues. "We have over time wrongly decided to have the Federal Government do things it can't do constitutionally. The challenge is to try to put limits on what we believe government, whether state or federal, can do."

He said we haven't seen many problems government has solved. He offered the War on Poverty, which started in 1965 as a federal program, as an example. "Part of the task of the Legislature is to think about what the things are we can really do," Hann said. "Now the amount of money we're spending on a problem is seen as an accomplishment."

He cited the achievement gap in education as an example of a problem on which the state spends large sums of money, but nothing ever changes. "Why don't we acknowledge that what we're doing isn't working?" he asked.

We've lost our way on what our objectives are in education. An interviewer asserted that education belongs to state government constitutionally. He wondered whether there are proposals that would make a difference in education that the Legislature is failing to deal with. Or is there a failure to develop good proposals?

Hann responded that we've lost our way on what our objectives are in education. "I don't think our education problems are solved by having some kind of magical programs people need to think up. We've had hundreds or thousands of those ideas over the years, some of them very creative. I think it comes down to the question of who are the people who decide. Who are the policymakers in education? Is it the people who work in the schools or a group of legislators in St. Paul or in Washington who write rules and force those rules on everybody?"

He believes a procedural governance problem is central to the problems we face in education. "Education is fundamentally a relationship among students and teachers. And, of course, parents are

part of that," he said. "If we make that relationship difficult or impossible, then we have problems. The whole job should be to foster those relationships."

Hann believes the Federal Government doesn't help in that, but, instead, puts more barriers in the way. He said he's visited hundreds of schools. In the good schools, there are people who have a real passion for education and who have real power to change things they see that need to be changed. "When you have people who are empowered to make decisions, that's when you have good results," he said.

The chartered schools that have been successful, he said, have worked hard to attract families to come to their schools. The schools have high standards for themselves. "School staff members are empowered, because of the structure of the chartered school, to be able to act on things," he said. "It's a government style that needs to be embraced."

There's a very serious divide in this country, as serious as the divide before the Civil War. In response to a question about how the political system can get to some type of unity in its vision for society, Hann said the Democratic and Republican parties are very different at a very fundamental level. "I don't know if there is compromise," he said.

He cited the Preamble to the Declaration of Independence, which has a very limited view of government and a very specific view of human nature. He said Republicans would say the preamble is true and that we should be faithful to the ideas in it. In contrast, he said, Democrats would say that things have changed, so those ideas are not true today. "How do you get unity out of that?" he asked.

"The issues that divide Democrats and Republicans are not trivial and it's not easy to find compromise," Hann continued. He doesn't know what to do about the large number of people who no longer believe in the ideas of the Declaration of Independence. "If you have a population that can't agree on that fundamental thing, in what sense do you have a country?" he asked.

"I don't know what the compromise is if one group says human nature is the same, while the other group says human nature has changed," he continued. "It's a deep, fundamental divide." He called this the root of the differences between Republicans and Democrats and the reason there's an inability to find common ground on a lot of fundamental issues.

The most important part of education is character formation. Hann believes we can do a lot of things very efficiently by using the Internet to train people to do things like math and science. But character formation doesn't have economies of scale. That has to involve the relationships between people and it must involve families. "The real work of education is to help students understand things like what it means to be good citizens and what is true about our country's founding principles," he said.

Good public policy should recognize the limits of what human beings are. If we don't believe that certain things are always true about people (e.g., we're not perfectible), Hann asserted, we try to do things to make people better human beings. "We've spent a lot of money on that," he said, "and I don't think it's worked. We've done more harm than good."

Federal mandates on special education are unconstitutional. "I don't think the Federal Government has any business dictating to local schools how they should deal with individuals who have unique needs," Hann said. The states and school districts should do that, he believes.

He thinks each child with special needs is unique and it's hard to say there's a single program that will meet kids' needs. We do have individualized educational plans (IEPs) for each special-needs child. We need to do more things like that to try to emphasize the relationship between the family and the school in terms of educating the child with special needs. We need to pay more attention to what the families believe works. "We need more flexibility in the system than we have," he said.

There's plenty of room for compromise in the area of transportation funding. Hann said most people don't understand how much the state spends on transportation: \$2 billion a year, growing at a rate of four percent per year. The gas tax and license fees must be spent on roads and bridges. The motor vehicle sales tax goes 60 percent to roads and bridges and 40 percent to transit. They're all outside of the general fund.

"The state could probably spend more money on transportation, but where does that come from?" he asked. "The question becomes whether we should spend general fund money on transportation. Right now we spend nothing from the general fund."

There's no accountability to the public for the billions of dollars the Metropolitan Council spends. Speaking about the Metro Council, Hann asked, "Who elected these guys? There's a complete lack of accountability to the public. I don't think that's a good idea. My pet peeve is light rail." He noted that there was never a legislative hearing or legislative debate on the issue of the proposed \$2 billion Southwest light-rail line. No legislator has ever voted for or against the light-rail project. "It's not good governance," he said. "This is not how you spend \$2 billion of public money."

Hann said he favors election of the Metro Council and said there's no other regional government in the country with the power of the Metro Council that is not elected. "Perhaps we should have a Mexit," he said.

In putting together good proposals for solving public problems, try to devise things that government doesn't have to do. "Many problems we face can't be solved by the Legislature," Hann said. People need to figure out: How do we live together? How do we deal with crime? How do we deal with the fact that there are no places for people to work in North Minneapolis?

"People of goodwill should come together and figure out how to solve things without going to the government," he said. "That's how good ideas come out, not through mandating by the Legislature. We do that all the time and I don't see that we've solved a lot of problems. We've tried the same process. Maybe it's time to change the process."

He said organizations of goodwill should focus on how the public can make things better without going to the Legislature for money. Perhaps there are some laws that are impediments that we should get rid of.

An interviewer asked whether we're lacking good, solid, actionable proposals from nongovernmental sources that could produce results in situations where the Legislature is at loggerheads. Hann

responded that in areas like transportation, which is an important public good, the Legislature should be having a major debate.

"That doesn't mean the compromise is easy," he said. "There are real differences and they probably need to be argued out. Sometimes that takes a while. I don't think we're done with this one yet. Do we need more taxes? What is the Metro Council's role? Should transit be more limited or more expansive? Those are legitimate legislative issues and are fairly complex."