



Lyndon Carlson

Legislature works best when both sides of aisle communicate effectively, incorporate each other's ideas

A Minnesota-in-the-post-pandemic-world interview

November 20, 2020

Background

00:00 - Introduction. (Paul Gilje)

Minnesota Rep. Lyndon Carlson (DFL-Crystal) holds the record as the longest-serving legislator in Minnesota history, after 24 terms spanning 48 years representing District 45A (parts of Hennepin County) in the Minnesota House of Representatives. He was a long-time social studies teacher at Henry and Edison High Schools in Minneapolis. He will retire from the Legislature on January 4, 2021.

01:15 - Lyndon Carlson Opening Remarks.

Carlson: I currently chair the Ways and Means Committee and serve on the Taxes and Rules Committee. I chaired various education committees for about 20 years and have been involved with fiscal issues ever since I was first appointed to the Tax Committee as a freshman legislator in 1973, when we were fine-tuning the **1971 Minnesota Miracle**. The overriding issue at present is the budget. Things were economically positive in the early part of 2020, until the COVID-19 pandemic hit. The projected budget deficit was \$2.5 billion in May of 2020, but \$805 million more revenue than projected has come in since then.

NOTE: Since the interview, new budget projections for FY-2021 flip the deficit to a \$641 million surplus and bring the FY 2022-2023 shortfall to a more manageable \$1.27 billion.
(MN Center for Fiscal Excellence)

Discussion

06:45 - Looking at public education in Minnesota, there is deep concern over the results, especially with under-performers. What advice would you provide to those succeeding you in the Legislature? **What areas do you feel need the most attention?**
(Paul Gilje)

Carlson: From my experience as a high school social studies teacher, **I believe investment in K-3 education could give students a better start.** I believe this could help students of color, students from low-income families, and many others who may be struggling. **Planting the seed for all-day kindergarten was the achievement in the Legislature that I am most proud of.** I helped create the original 50 sites of all-day kindergarten and universal all-day kindergarten about 25 years later.

9:43 - CARLSON STORY- All-day kindergarten's success 1

12:14 - Former Minnesota Rep. and Congressional Rep. Martin Sabo called himself a liberal decentralist with a "healthy respect for federalism," recognizing that most solutions come from the local and state levels. It seems today that all politics are national, and these debates drown out local issues. How have you seen this evolve, and **how do we bring Minnesota and local government back in a way that is not held hostage to national politics?** (Paul Ostrow)

Carlson: Philosophically, I belong in Martin Sabo's camp and believe in local control on the state level. I think it is a mistake to micromanage local units. I've seen former school board and city council members run for the Minnesota Legislature, and work on the same initiatives from a different angle of state government. **I hope the next wave of COVID-19 stimulus could be appropriated in a revenue-sharing approach**, allowing for state and local units to manage their shares to best meet their needs. With the CARES Act COVID-19 relief funding, we could not supplant the state budget and had to spend under strict federal guidelines.

15:49 - Do you see signs of hope at the Legislature for more bipartisanship in wake of the election results, or just considering where we are at today? (Paul Ostrow)

Carlson: I'm always hopeful. Minnesota is the only divided Legislature in the country, setting the stage for polarization. The best solution is to keep talking with the other caucus and the other body.

16:51 - CARLSON STORY - Breakfast with former Governor Al Quie 2

Valuable friendships develop, and these personal relationships can allow projects to move forward in the face of resistance. An advantage of the Legislative Civility Caucus is that it brings members together who can be isolated in private offices on separate floors along partisan lines, especially with the House and Senate now in separate buildings. It's a question of how to structure things in a way to get to know members of the other caucus and the other bodies of the Legislature.

NOTE: See **2018 Civic Caucus interview about the Legislative Civility Caucus with Dave Bartholomay**.

21:25 - Should technical schools be made an independent entity, and removed from the MnSCU/Minnesota State system? Could doing so help this form of education be more recognized and accepted both at the secondary and at the post-secondary level? (Paul Gilje)

Carlson: I was in favor of fostering more cooperation between the systems, but I did not advocate for the merger as it was structured to create MnSCU (now called Minnesota State). I think the merger created some mission issues in understanding the roles of all three units.

26:25 - Do you know if the presence of a Legislative Civility Caucus is unique to the Minnesota Legislature? (Janis Clay)

Carlson: I'm not sure whether this is unique to Minnesota, but **I hope it's not!**

27:11 - Could you explain how work is getting done at the Legislature in the era of COVID and Zoom and do you see any of these changes continuing post-pandemic? (Janis Clay)

Carlson: Due to COVID-19, we are conducting business virtually over Zoom . Ways and Means was the first major committee to hold a virtual hearing, and we did a practice run-through the day before, with no agenda besides learning the procedures. We need to pay more attention to procedural aspects than we did before.

Conducting business virtually will likely be the reality for the next legislative session. This can create transparency issues, since not everyone is familiar with the technology and there are some timing limitations to avoid conducting too many simultaneous meetings.

I have made 48 years of perfect attendance in the Legislature , never missing a day, but I came close once due to a blizzard. I think in the future, making this temporary rule permanent to allow the use of virtual meeting technologies could improve hearing attendance.

32:54 - CARLSON STORY - 48 years of 100 percent perfect attendance ³

35:05 - Considering that Health and Human Services (HHS) and Education are the two largest pieces of the state budget, what are your observations of the HHS Budget? Looking at early childhood education, should we continue our investment in childcare assistance for parents or should we begin to build up a program in schools geared toward four-year-olds? (Clarence Shallbetter)

Carlson: I perceive early childcare as an educational opportunity. I would rely on experts for the precise age, but a lot of discussion has been around three- and four-year-olds.

37:17 - CARLSON STORY - Kindergarteners can focus⁴

The state has relied more on students' share of tuition in higher education as the state has had budgetary problems over the years and this has been a disappointment. **Changing demographics have increased the HHS share of the state budget** due to the needs for long-term care.

41:46 - Legislators seem to be selected from a narrow constituency in terms of their philosophies. Could ranked-choice voting (RCV) help increase the concept of civility in the Legislature? (Paul Gilje)

Carlson: As a candidate, ranked-choice voting means you have to speak beyond your narrow base . If you did not have a majority of the votes, you could not have alienated a

large portion of those who did not vote for you as their first choice. I have grown in my support of RCV after being initially cautious, since it has shown success in the City of Minneapolis and other places.

44:00 - You are the only remaining member of the Legislature who was originally elected on a nonpartisan, rather than partisan, ballot. **Would you advocate a return to the nonpartisan ballot?** (Paul Gilje)

Carlson: There is a certain truth in packaging with party designation . I would keep this on the ballot, after my first experience running on a nonpartisan ballot.

44:32 - CARLSON STORY - First campaign back in 1971 5

45:45 - **How do you think the new Independent Caucus in the Minnesota Senate could affect the upcoming legislative session?** (Dan Loritz)

Carlson: It will depend on how frequently the two Independent members align with the majority caucus. It would appear this gives the Republicans a more solid majority. It's about the driving issues in various regions of Minnesota.

50:03 - Do you plan to write a memoir in your upcoming retirement? **Are there other ways you hope to pass along your wisdom from decades in the Minnesota Legislature?** (Randy Johnson)

Carlson: I was approached by the Minnesota Historical Society for **a project interviewing senior members of the Legislature.** I haven't heard anything more about this, but it may go forward in my retirement.

51:49 - CARLSON STORY - Martin Sabo's "reform" of the Judiciary Committee 6

54:56 - A major concern in education has been the **growing amount of money needed for special education, due to expensive federal mandates**, coupled with insufficient federal funding to sufficiently obey them. **What are your observations on this?** (Clarence Shallbetter)

Carlson: There is a long history of underfunding federal special education mandates. After the federal government committed about 50 years ago to funding 20 percent of the cost, they've never achieved anything close, hitting roughly 12 percent at the highest, but usually much lower. We've passed resolutions to ask Congress to do this, and both sides support it, but this is just one of many congressional issues that don't materialize.

59:16 - **Has part of this discussion been asking the federal government to reduce the regulations if they are not willing to fund them?** (Clarence Shallbetter)

Carlson: I helped appoint a **special task force to look at the state special education mandates. We got little feedback on things they would want to discontinue or change** and there are strong advocates for special education in every school district. Federal mandates aren't in our purview in the State House, except for getting them fully funded.

1:01:06 - Do you see potential for virtual meeting technologies to increase rather than decrease the ability for citizen participation in legislative sessions and to engage younger people in state and local affairs? (Helen Baer)

Carlson: Yes, there is great potential to open participation more broadly using virtual meeting technologies . This could particularly help with transportation issues for people living in Greater Minnesota.

1:03:37 - CARLSON STORY - Young people's tech savvy⁷

1:06:47 - If there were three changes that you could make in the Legislature to reduce partisanship, increase the open public discussion of ideas and improve the legislative process, what changes would you make? (Paul Ostrow)

Carlson: Communication and incorporating ideas from both sides is essential. I would always listen carefully during hearings and meet with both caucuses separately to hear and incorporate suggestions from both sides. The opposing caucus was always appreciative of this. As chair of the education section of the Appropriations Committee, I had quite a record coming out of committee with unanimous bill passage, despite controversial issues. Something I have done historically is to have joint committee meetings with both the House and Senate, which helps increase member attendance and interaction between bodies of the legislature.

1:09:56 - CARLSON STORY - Give and take with a very small compromise⁸

1:11:08 - Did you see your role as committee chair not as wearing your partisan hat, but rather, leading the whole committee to create the best possible product? Could this type of attitude help committee chairs see their roles not as partisan warriors, but rather as leaders searching for the best public outcome? (Paul Ostrow)

Carlson: We would build the bill together, get everyone involved and gain allies on all sides of the committee. When I chaired the education division of Appropriations, I would never make the motion myself to do the allocations. Instead, I kept track of which members were interested in various amendments and would invite them to make the motion. It is crucial that you involve the other caucus and this is becoming increasingly more difficult.

1:15:07 - Let the Legislature call itself into special session⁹

1:17:23 - Considering a potential deficit facing the state, do you think a tax increase should be discussed? Should certain tax areas be examined? (Dana Schroeder)

Carlson: It's premature to talk about ways of balancing the budget before knowing the size of the projected deficit, but I would say that **anything could be on the table, considering the size of the expected deficit.**

1:19:45 - Do you have more observations on past successes in the Legislature that we can look toward as examples going forward? (Janis Clay)

Carlson: I believe politics is the art of compromise and the key is involving people. There's always been a partisan nature to the legislative process, even when we were nonpartisan. There have been difficult sessions and deadlock in the past, but I think the walls have gotten steeper recently. Especially when dealing with budget issues, you have to be somewhat fluid and willing to compromise and communicate with both caucuses.

When we've had success, it's been the ability of some legislator or someone in the executive branch to bring people together. It's important to have good working relationships, and to keep the channels of communication open.

1:22:58 - CARLSON STORY - Politics: the art of compromise or the art of having the votes? ¹⁰

1:27:23 - The state government doesn't spend money, it distributes money, mostly to local governments, with the biggest piece going to school boards. **Do you have any thoughts on whether or not the traditional "school board" is the best way we can handle that level of structure? (Paul Gilje)**

Carlson: I don't have a particular agenda advocating the restructuring of school boards. I believe in local control, and I think historically the school board has worked well. I would like to give school boards more authority regarding referendum renewal.

1:28:46 - Help school boards renew referendum levies.¹¹

I think we have a good slate of candidates for the Robbinsdale school board, the district where I live. As a suburban legislator, I don't have a large role in the central cities' public school districts.

1:32:23 - Closing remarks.

Carlson: I've been civically active for 60 years, 48 years in public office, and I don't know much else other than to remain active in the community in my retirement. This might be through politics, but I also have an interest in volunteering for local organizations.

Carlson story footnotes

¹ 9:43 - All-day kindergarten's success.

After the first 50 sites, a superintendent told me this was so successful that they had to rewrite their first-grade curriculum. After we passed universal all-day kindergarten, the same superintendent told me they needed to re-write their curriculum all the way through 12th grade.

² 16:51 - Breakfast with former Governor Al Quie.

Former governor Al Quie advised me that it's crucial to keep talking to the other caucus and keep those avenues of communication open.