

Welcome to COWS > About COWS > Newsroom > News

Can State Return to Greatness?

By: Joel Rogers

From: *Madison Capital Times*

Date: 4/15/2002

My column last week ended with the exclamation, "What a disgrace our government has become. Really, it could break your heart." With that in mind here are some solutions for our next governor.

Here's a simple framing idea. The present dysfunctionality of our government - the narrowness and ignorance of its debate, its terrible corruption by special money interests, its invisibility in decision-making to much of the public - should itself be a major campaign issue. I'd like to see some gubernatorial candidate pledge, in light of the sorry mess in Madison we've seen these past few months, to make election and government reform the first thing they promise to do in office.

The candidate should pledge to call an urgent special session of the Legislature just for that purpose, to consider an Omnibus Wisconsin Democracy Act or some such - something that will immediately identify their time as governor as the time of something new and better than what we have at present. Better if all the candidates make that pledge, including Scott McCallum. What's important is that this issue get out there, and one or many leaders get identified with making reform really happen.

Now, it's an axiom of conventional wisdom in American politics that this stuff has no political legs. When it comes to the process and structure of how we elect and govern - how we count votes, carve election districts, finance elections and the like - any expert will tell you that the public is too stupid or bored or simply uninterested in such things to lend them passion. And, in part, the experts are right (not the stupid part, of course, but the bored and uninterested ones).

By design if not by nature, the issues are complex and hard to reduce to sound bites. Their effects are sufficiently far removed from their causes that they prove an elusive target. It's hard to bring a crowd to its feet in anger or joyous celebration, for example, over a discussion of alternative electoral systems (multimember districts, proportional representation, cumulative voting, single transferable vote, etc. - even now, notice how your eyes are glazing over, your patience already waning). That's true even though much of what is wrong with our public policies owes more or less directly to them.

When all is said and done, the same is true of campaign finance. Upward of 90 percent of all campaign monies come either from families in the top 1 percent of the income distribution or from corporations. If you were a disinterested Martian who came to Earth knowing everything about human nature and nothing of the U.S. Constitution, you'd rightly conclude that ours is a system in which a tiny minority of people and very large private collections of cash known as corporate "persons" get to choose our government - or at least those who can compete to occupy it. But while this clearly violates the promise of a government "of the people" and "by the people," and certainly has long ceased to pretend to not interfere with a government that's also "for the people," ordinary citizens have been very slow to anger on the point. At the national level, serious campaign finance reform has been pushed for about 15 years now. But it's taken all that time just to get even McCain-Feingold, a relatively minor reform that will do very little to alter the above-indicated balance of power in how we elect a government.

But this picture of public indifference is much less grim at the state level. More than a dozen states have passed, usually by quite comfortable margins, serious campaign finance reform. And others have sought to improve their government process through direct debate of it: changes in how they handle election district reapportionment; the consideration of alternative voting systems with more proportional representation of voters; administrative reforms bringing the power of the Internet to improve citizen service in a variety of areas; greater delegation of authority to, and benchmarking performance among, local communities; a return in certain crucial areas of overdone partisanship to commission-style governance; etc.

Why this is happening in state and local government rather than at the national level may just be a matter of familiarity and scale. At the state level, people can more easily see the effects of reform, and everything else being equal, reform is easier to achieve. And part of the genius as well as limitation of American democracy is our commitment to a federal system, in which the states retain "plenary" powers while the federal government has only "limited" ones, giving the former in some ways more room to maneuver and continually reinvent themselves.

But it does not matter, really, what the source of greater state innovation and experimentation is. What is enough is that the conventional wisdom about the public not caring about good government and process just isn't true, at least in many states.

But not, thus far, in Wisconsin. Which is pretty strange when you look at it, since Wisconsin's big claim to fame is that we're the motherlode of state innovation and policy experiment. And one of the reasons we earned that reputation, one of the crucial conditions of it, was that we were squeaky clean and up-to-date in our government process. I am convinced that part of our return to greatness as a state is the recapture of this mix of experiment and integrity - a bold, modernizing, forward-looking spirit of reform. No other state has the simple "Forward" as its state motto, which more or less says it all. "Forward" to an unknown future, knowing that we'll survive it if we keep our wits about us. "Forward" to possibilities as yet unrealized in this, the richest nation on Earth.

And there is no more important place for that reform than in government itself. Government can be stupid and corrupt, or reasonably informed and reasonably accountable. Which would you like it to be? And government can be inept and out-of-date, or reasonably current. Which would you choose? In Wisconsin, we used to have clear answers to these simple questions. It's time to offer them again now.

Joel Rogers is director of COWS, the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, at the UW-Madison. COWS is sponsoring "Sustaining Wisconsin," a

statewide dialogue about the future of Wisconsin. Go to www.sustainingwisconsin.org for more information.

Copyright © Madison Capital Times