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State Capitol Newsletter

Direct Legislation?

One of the characteristic postures of the populist reformers in the country and notably in the Middlewest and West in the early years of the century was a demand for constitutional authorization of direct popular legislation.

The "initiative and referendum" idea remains as a part of the political structure of some states today, and notably in California, now the most populous state of the federal Union.

Curiously, because Wisconsin was among the leaders of the country in "progressive" reform, the idea never caught on here. The "I aand R" system, as politicians call it, would allow citizens to petition for a ballot proposition, which when submitted to a popular vote would become statute law--equally as effective as the acts enacted by the legislature. Backers hold that such a constitutional change would provide brakes as well as prods on legislative action.

Now there are signs of a revival of interest in the idea of direct popular legislation. A Milwaukee civic group is campaigning for the required amendment to the constitution, abetted by some media managers in the metropolitan area. Several proposals are before the legislature, including at least one under the name of one of the more conservative members of the state assembly Republican caucus.

Such a change would require a constitutional amendment, which in turn requires two successive legislative approvals, followed by a popular vote of ratification.

Septic Tank Ban?

Most of the population of the state is served by sanitary sewers.

Currently multi-million dollar sums are being spent on more intensive management of sewage, under the impetus of big federal and state government subsidies to localities. The state government a few years ago issued bonds in record size in order to provide financial incentives to cooperating municipalities.

But the individual septic tank system of accomodation of wastes continue as a fact of life in many of the smaller unincorporated communities and in rural Wisconsin. Should they be put under closer public control? The issue arose last week as a Madison environmental group petitioned the state board of natural resources to issue rules that would prohibit the installation of such private systems in much of the state. The agency received the proposal without comment or reaction, but Scretary Anthony Earl of the administrative department said it would be analyzed.

The proposal called for holding tanks or public sewage systems as alternate methods of waste handling, although the plan acknowledged that persons actively engaged in agriculture and single one family residences on lots of five acres or more could be exempt.

One estimate has it that there are about 500,000 septic tanks, serving about one third of the dwellings of Wisconsin. Some are for seasonal use. But users include about 1,000,000 persons, officials calculate.

Indian Relations

Perhaps there is no group in the Wisconsin population that has such a sensitive relationship with the state department of natural resources as the native Americans, as political protocol now holds that the Indians should be described.

Last week the department acknowledged its awareness of that reality when it chose a young Winnebago, to advise it of the needs and the concerns of the state Indian population.

He is Boye Ladd, a resident of Black River Falls, a combat veteran of the war in Viet Nam, and a spokesman for his race for several years in the organization of cultural ceremonials.

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The Alcoholics

Alcohol is the most abused drug in the country, and Wisconsin illustrates at least its proportionate share of the national problem.

So says the state division of health policy and planning, which calculates that nearly 10 per cent of the Wisconsin population, or an unhappy 292,000 individuals, are alcoholics and alcohol abusers.

Moreover, students of the problem calculate that each alcoholic or alcohol abuser affects negatively four or five other persons because of his drinking problem. Thus alcoholism has become one of the social issues of the times, and a major issue in social welfare policy planning.

Adds the Council in a current report:

"The individual user experiences increased risk of illness, reduced life expectancy, and additional health care expenses.

"Both the abuser and his employer suffer lost wages and lost production, while society as a whole bears the cost of motor accidents, crime, and expanding health care and social welfare expenditures."

Recyclers Hit

A major economic enterprise in Wisconsin is the recycling of waste paper. Nineteen major mills are engaged in such production. Last week their owners and managers worried about an abrupt decision of a state regulatory agency that they said may severely curtail their operations, or force them to shut down altogether.

The problem is that waste paper may contain minute quantities of an industrial chemical known as "PCB's," that such materials are discharged in paper mill wastes that enter public waters, contaminate fish, and thus potentially threaten human health. Some tests have connected the materials with cancer.

The state board of natural resources has abruptly acted to prohibit, for all practical purposes, the discharge of such materials into public waters. The recycling mill men protested that they would be severely constricted, and probably forced to close, for reasons beyond their power to control.

Cautious Generosity

Sometimes legislative politicians are divided between a prudent desire to accommodate major pressure groups, and a cautious concern about antagonizing the taxpayer.

So it was recently when a legislative committee that is charged with analyzing major proposals for policy adjustments in the costly business of financing public employe pensions examined an ambitious proposition.

The plan: to provide for automatic cost of living adjustments in pensions for civil servants, state and local, actual and prospective.

The price tag on the plan: about $119,000,000.

In the currently gloomy atmosphere at the state capitol, where Gov. Lucey and his men are worrying about a possible deficit in the state treasury, such a proposition was clearly impracticable.

But the public employe beneficiary group is numerous, aggressive, and attentive. As a result, the advisory committee of legislators and others endorsed the idea of such protections against erosion of annuity values of public employes. But they said it should be acted upon at a future time when the state treasury situation may be more favorable.

Lucey's Friends

Gov. Lucey, who managed to win legislative consent for most of his propositions to three separate legislatures since he became the state's chief executive five years ago, has taken his lumps lately.

The curt rejection of an ambitious transportation policy and finance bill was generally regarded as the most painful of his aggressive career in the executive department. There had been a belief that he would try to revive the measure in the next sitting of the legislature in January. But last week it was indicated that he has given up the cause.

But there were cheerful developments elsewhere, including a record attendance at the Milwaukee Lucey fund raising dinner sponsored by "Friends for Lucey," his major campaign vehicle in two successful runs for the governorship, and which is presumably apparently aware of the possibility that he may seek yet another term there in 1976.

Students of the statehouse political scene speculated also that he may have other plans, including an incursion into national politics. In 1972, they recalled, Mr. Lucey acknowledged an interest in the vice presidential nomination of the Democrats. As a new presidential campaign year approaches, Mr. Lucey has been carefully neutral as the field of White House aspirants has grown.

Whittow to Leave?

In the legislative wing of the state capitol, meanwhile, there was speculation about change in the leadership roster of the state senate Democratic majority.

Sen. Wayne Whittow, now the senate Democratic quarterback is running for the substantially more remunerative office of Milwaukee city treasurer, being vacated by an incumbent who is retiring. He is regarded as a favorite to win. As a result, there will be a new signal caller of the ruling party in the legislature's upper house.

Normally the assisant leader would move up. He is young Sen. William Bablitch of Stevens Point. But there may be other aspirants, one a veteran law-maker, the other a first termer in the upper house. Sen. Ronald Parys of Milwaukee is best known for his patient promotion of a constitutional amendment that would permit the operation of a state lottery for the support of the schools. Sen. Gerald Kleczka, a veteran member of the assembly who moved up to a senate seat this year, is probably best known as the chief author of the state's new bingo law, which thus far has been shown to produce substantially less revenue for the state treasury than the enthusiastic bingo advocates had predicted during long years of patient lobbying to revise the state constitution to authorize bingo games by non-profit groups.

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