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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 on 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 and 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 a brake 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 some intensive management of sewerage, under the auspices of big federal and state government subsidies to localities. The state government a few years ago passed bonds on record date in order to provide financial incentives to cooperating municipalities.

But the individual septic tank system of accommodation of town customers as a fact of life in many of the smaller communities, in 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 at session, but Secretary Anthony Earl of the administrative department said it would be analyzed.

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

One estimate has it that there are about 300,000 septic tanks, serving about one third of the dwellings of Wisconsin. Some are for seasonal use. But users include about 1,500,000 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 Boyd 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 conversation.

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 percent of the Wisconsin population, or an estimate 350,000 individuals, are alcoholics and alcohol abusers.

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

Adds the Council in a current report:

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

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

Recyclers Hit

A major academic enterprise in Wisconsin is the recycling of waste paper. Nineteen major mills are engaged in such production. Last week their owners and managers carried 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 then 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 accomodate major pressure groups, and a cautious concern about safeguarding 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 undertook an actuarial preparation.

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

The price tag on the plan: about $110,000,000.

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 presently 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 came to become 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 curves in the executive department. There was even a belief that he might 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 quest.

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 as two successful runs for the governorship, and which is presumably supremely aware of the possibility that he may seek yet another term there in 1978.

Students of the state-house 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 key presidential campaign year approaches, Mr. Lucey has been carefully neutral as the field of White House aspirants has grown.

Whitow To Leave?

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

Sen. Wayne Whitow, 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 assistant leader would move up. He is young Sen. William Bablitch of Stevens Point, but there may be other aspirations, one a veteran law-maker, the other a first termer in the upper house Sen. Ronald Flynn of Milwaukee at least known for his natural 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 then for has been found to possess some serious legal reservations for the state treasury than the enthusiastic bingo advocates had predicted during long years of patient lobbying to convince the state establishment to authorize bingo games by non-profit groups.

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