

Can Politicians Hold to Principle Without Brutalizing Each Other?



Roger Moe & Steve Sviggum

Moderated by Mitch Pearlstein

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Introduction

Mitch Pearlstein, Founder & President, Center of the American Experiment: I first met Roger Moe 33 years ago this month, as we spent a lovely day taking in Red River Valley Days in Crookston. By comparison, temperatures down here in the Cities over the last few days have been positively tropical.

As for Steve Sviggum, we met much more recently – during the Quie administration. And in comparison to economic conditions back then, budgetary problems discussed by Governor Pawlenty in his State of the State today are a walk in Como Park.

Add the fact that tomorrow is Valentine's Day, and the fact that our two distinguished guests really are great pals, and it's hard to conceive of anyone in the vicinity of the Capitol, a stroll up the road, being the least bit testy with any of their colleagues for months, maybe all the way until the Legislature adjourns in April.

Nevertheless, being the professional politicians they are, I'm sure Messrs. Sviggum and Moe somehow will find at least a couple of nasty things to talk about over the next hour.

It's naïve to believe that politics ever was or ever could be a fitting line of work for people with weak stomachs. Thin skin, yes; weak stomachs, no. But having said that, one need not be overly squeamish or timid to believe some moments and tendencies in politics have grown a little bit too rough.

As some of you know, American Experiment publishes one or two symposia a year in which several dozen writers have their say. Our latest, released in January, on what it means to be an urban conservative, featured pieces from 40 men and women from around the state and nation. It was the second largest number of writers for any of the anthologies. But germane to our conversation this afternoon is the fact that the one symposium with even more writers – 44 in all and published four years ago – addressed the question of civility,

or its lack, in Minnesota and national politics. The subject, obviously, struck an acutely sensitive chord in lots of people.

One of those good folks was our friend D. J. Leary, who wrote with particular feeling.

“When I run into some individual I have known from DFL or Republican campaign participation,” he allowed, “I am less and less surprised that they’re no longer active in party politics. They say it in different ways, but it all means the same thing: ‘It just isn’t fun anymore.’ ‘There’s no room for friendly disagreement in politics, even within one’s own party anymore.’ ‘They play by different rules today that are totally negative and seem based solely on the importance of the personal attack.’ Some simply say: ‘I don’t like what politics has become.’”

A part of me thinks that D.J.’s strictures are too severe. But then I ask myself, how many people would be eager to run for office if they knew their families would be entrapped into listening to all the excessively cutting things opponents might say about them?

DFLer Roger Moe was the longest serving Senate Majority Leader in Minnesota history and now serves as president of National Strategies, Inc. Republican Steve Sviggum was the longest serving Speaker in Minnesota’s modern era and now serves commissioner of the Department of Labor and Industry. I don’t know of two classier guys in politics and I deeply appreciate their joining us today.

Rather than start off talking too abstractly about being nice and all, if you could, please give a couple examples of issues over the last several years where, despite deep philosophical differences between and among the parties, good things happened—when you were able, as they say, to get along.

Steve Sviggum: While we were serving together in 1999, the state of Minnesota was facing a different economic situation than now. We had a significant surplus, so we were able to invest in education. Oh, I’m being politically correct now, talking about investments instead of spending. Look what you’ve done to me! We were also able to provide some significant tax cuts to Minnesotans, both on a permanent basis and on a one-time basis. While there were some disagreements as we went through it, we ended up with a package that I think was pretty balanced and pretty respectful of Minnesotans.

Pearlstein: Before Roger adds something, it seems to me that it’s a whole bunch easier if there’s a whole lot of money to work with. So, keep that in mind and, Roger, give me an episode, if you would.

Roger Moe: You notice how Steve answered the question right away? I love to negotiate with him because he cannot stand quiet. He’s got to have a conversation going all the time. I would love just to sit there during negotiations, and he would start talking about the budget and different things he had to do, and I wouldn’t say anything. That was my technique with him.

Sviggum: That’s so very true. My staff would warn me all the time: “Don’t say anything, don’t say anything.” For the first four meetings of negotiations, Roger would sit there, he’d have a little note, he’d check off a few things, he’d write down a few things. By the end of the fourth meeting, I’d laid all my cards on the table—where I would go, what my bottom line was—and he still hadn’t said a word!

Moe: To your point, I think having resources, having surpluses, is a nice position for negotiation. But I also think that the reverse works, as well—I mean, when your back is against the wall and you have to make decisions. The early 1980s were a

particularly difficult time, when we were in recession and the budget kept slipping, and we had to do three things that were probably not very popular: We raised some taxes, we reduced a lot of the budgets, and we performed some shifts in the overall budget. So I think both having some resources as well as having the pressure's on you, can create an opportunity for good negotiation.

An example comes to mind. Steve and I spent countless hours together on the budget. I'll just tell you of a circumstance in the Senate, and this was probably late '80s, early '90s, when there was pressure on sex offenses and folks wanted different penalties for sex and drug offenses. I could just see this thing was going to get pretty divided. It had all the makings of it. So I called the Senate Republican leader and said, get me your three best thinkers in this area. As I recall, and I hope I'm not leaving anybody out, it was Tom Neuville, Jim Ramstad, and Pat McGowan. So you had folks who knew about law enforcement and the judicial system, and I said, okay, I'm going to have Alan Spear, Randy Kelly, and Jane Ranum. We sent them off, outside of the committee process and everything. We just put them in a room and said, "We want you to focus, because this issue is going to be potentially very divisive." They went to work, took the best ideas from both groups, and put together a plan with the understanding that on the floor we would have a couple of amendments. In the final analysis, the package passed overwhelmingly. It had both additional punishment and additional prevention, and I think we avoided a prison-building binge that a lot of states didn't avoid. I thought that was at least one example where we basically got the best ideas from everybody.

Pearlstein: Let me ask an intra-party question. You're negotiating tough stuff, and you come to some kind of agreement. Or go back to the issue you were just talking about: Those six legislators, all of whom are really top-flight, have to take some chances. So they go back to their respective caucuses, or you go back to your respective caucuses, and you say, "Folks, this is what I've

agreed to." What kind of reaction did you get if they didn't really agree with you?

Moe: Well, that certainly has happened. But I think the key to it, and you mentioned it, is that all of those are really excellent legislators, and they were highly regarded, well liked, and respected. I think that's the key. It's kind of interesting that most legislators think that when they leave, they're going to be remembered by that great bill that they passed that created something or by some profound change in law. The bottom line is, very few legislators are ever remembered that way. You're remembered by who you are and how you got along with your peers and colleagues and whether they trusted you and respected you. Very few people are remembered by a bill.

Pearlstein: Steve, when you went back to your caucus, sometimes pushing them in a direction they didn't want to go, how was it?

Sviggum: I'd get bounced off the walls. You cannot always get consensus, especially when you're talking with 68 or 81 or 69 people, whatever we had at different times when I was the Speaker. After I'd met with Roger, I'd come back and tell them what I'd decided, and then it was time to bounce Sviggum off the left wall, the right wall, and back and forth, and I'd say, "No, this is what we're going to do. This is in the best interests of the state of Minnesota."

Like most of the electorate, you get caucus members who have expectations. Their expectations are sometimes greater than you can deliver. And, you know, as the caucus leader, you kind of have to meet those expectations or you get bounced off the wall a little. I tried to tell them often that compromise is important. You go to Burger King and you get it your way. You go to the Legislature and you have to compromise a little bit. I have friends in this room who, at times when I was Speaker, were all after me to retire. The Taxpayers League twice publicly took me on, to eliminate my ability to be Speaker. They were supposed to be my friends, I would have thought,

but twice they were after me—I was too far to the left. [Editors note: As he said this, Speaker Sviggum was smiling warmly toward the former president of the Taxpayers League, who was in the audience and smiling back.]

Pearlstein: I just had a thought. Steve is a referee, a basketball referee. And it seems to me that a referee gets yelled at a lot and shouldn't care a whole bunch. I'm being quite serious now. Did being a referee help you be Speaker, so that if your colleagues, who you like and respect, were chopping your head off, it wasn't the end of the world?

Sviggum: Absolutely. Without question. I say this sincerely, and I tell people this: You don't please all the parents all the time. But when you're a basketball referee with 1,500 people that close to you out on the basketball court—and, by the way, you do hear most of the things they say—you can't react. You do hear it, and then occasionally you look up in the stands to see who it is. I can vote on worker's compensation, property tax reform, and Right to Know, and that pales in comparison to the heat you take as a referee. It was good preparation.

Pearlstein: Let me ask this, the flip side. On what issues, other than the really obvious ones—abortion, for example—were the disagreements so perpetually severe that you couldn't make the progress that you wanted to make, that needed to be made?

Sviggum: Can I give a credit to Roger Moe? And I'm going to focus on 2001, or it might have been 2002. That year we had significant property tax reform in Minnesota. That year we basically took over the school funding portion. Roger was opposed to it; in fact, I think he voted against it.

Moe: I voted against it, that's right.

Sviggum: Today, he'll say that he was right.

Moe: I'll chisel it on my gravestone!

Sviggum: See?! But he worked throughout the process. Remember: At that time we had Governor Ventura, who wanted to do some significant tax cuts. I focused on this property tax reform to reduce the school funding, and get it off the property taxes. Roger thought there'd be some bad consequences. But, to his credit, we were able to work through an agreement, a compromise, which two of the three parties thought was in the best interests of Minnesota. And Roger, knowing that there were some consequences that he thought were not in the best interests of Minnesota, voted against it personally, but allowed the process to take place, rather than prolong the session. And, for that, I compliment you.

Moe: It was a bad bill.

Pearlstein: We've been talking so far about bills on which you either agree or disagree. We haven't said anything about people being excessively uncivil, nasty with one another. Is this truly a problem? Do folks at the Legislature or in other parts of American politics just get too mean to each other? As we say, politics ain't beanbags. This is the way it works. Has something changed over the last number of years?

Moe: Yes, it has changed. I came into the Legislature in 1971, so I participated briefly, at least, in a different generation. It was before we had party designations for legislators. Most of the legislators, at that time, moved here and stayed during the session. That's a factor in all of this. Secondly, politics is a human, interactive sport. You can't de-socialize politics. If you de-socialize politics, it's basically D's and R's. So, we socialized together, there were events, we went to dinner together, and we stayed at the same hotels. You got together at night once in a while.

The ethics laws have had an impact. I wouldn't blame it all on that, though. I think there are now more people who can go home at night, and they do. There's no kind of watering hole anymore like where everybody used to go.

Also, when I first got to the Senate, there were no women. Now, I think we have one of the highest percentages of women in the Legislature in the nation and they're, by and large the family caregivers, so they're going to go home to their families.

So demographic realities, the different mix of the Legislature, folks living closer to the Capitol, and some of the ethics changes; they've all kept us from getting to know one another as individuals. Aside from the fact that we spent a lot of time at the Capitol together, Steve and I traveled together, our wives were often with us, we went on international trips together. Those things have a way of breaking down barriers.

Pearlstein: I want to come back in a few moments to how to fix that problem in hopes of spending some time together face to face, but, Steve, have things gotten nastier?

Sviggum: For sure they have. And, honestly, I may have been part of it. I'm going to state up front that none of us are lily white, and it always seems that when we're two or four or ten years removed, things were better back then. You know, I look back to basketball in high school, and in my mind I scored 20 points every game. I go back and check the box scores, and I didn't score 20 points every game. And it's probably true about the Legislature, as well.

Roger and I have had a very civil relationship for a couple of reasons. First of all, I've respected the man greatly, to the point of being in awe of him. And secondly, when we were on forums like this, we would try to outdo each other in relationship to who could use the words like "balance" or "in the best interest of Minnesota" more. I believe that when we were speaking to various groups, one day we counted, and there were 16 times that either he or I used the word "balance." That *we* were the balanced one or that *our* position was the balanced position. Now, you don't hear the words "balance" or "in the best interest of Minnesota" too often.

I would also tell you that in negotiations, in the way that you treat people, it's very important not to question other people's motives. I was a failure at that one time for which I feel bad to this day. In 2003, if you'll remember, there was a contentious issue about Indian gaming in the state of Minnesota. And, by the way, I haven't changed; I still think we should have competitive gaming. I believe that in my heart. For an entire year, I was stating that the DFL majority in the Senate was a wholly owned subsidiary of the Indian casinos. I was questioning people's motives, and I shouldn't have done that. I was being pushed by my staff to be sure that people knew this. I just publicly want to say I was wrong in doing that.

Moe: I would just echo that—and the Speaker is right on—words matter. Words matter. And the choice of words matters. And it's too bad that we've gotten to the point where both sides, rather than using words that pull us together, use words that drive us apart. That is a key factor in all of this.

Pearlstein: So things have gotten tougher. But does it mean anything? Has the state of Minnesota actually been hurt by it?

Moe: Well, let me read something. This is a letter from Moody's on Minnesota's bond rating: "Moody's currently maintains AA1 general obligation rating for the state of Minnesota, with a stable outlook. The AA rating is based on the state's low debt ratio, sound proven economy, basically strong industrial diversity, and healthy demographics and improving balance. These strengths are offset by the challenge of potential political gridlock, preventing the Legislature from reaching consensus towards budgets, including a state government shutdown that occurred in 2005 for 13 days." So, yes. I mean, if you're ending up paying more in interest rates. This is quite shocking.

Pearlstein: Let me divide things up a bit. On the one hand, it's a matter of disagreements over principle. But on the other hand, to what extent

have just bad manners and lack of civility been a problem?

Sviggum: I think lack of civility, actually, may be purposely pursued as a political strategy on occasion. I remember on July 1, 2005, when a headline in the paper read, “Government Shutdown.” I said, “Well, the Democrats now have the headline they wanted against Pawlenty. That was their strategy.” Whether that was true or not, I don’t know. But I do think it was the strategy of some.

Moe: I’ve been involved the last few years speaking to legislatures around the country. I’m on a nonprofit called the Policy Consensus Initiative, and we look at ways to better resolve disputes, among other things. One of the things we’ve been working on is trying to educate legislators about a power of theirs that’s probably more of a responsibility: the power to convene. I know that’s the way I’ve always felt. I’ve always thought this is what governors should do and what legislators should be doing. I tried it a few times and it worked very well. By virtue of getting elected, you’re given a certain standing and you can bring people together. One of the things legislators usually want to do is put a stake in the ground and have a strong position, and when they do, they’re certainly not going to invite their opponents to the table. But this new initiative requires an entirely different approach: You don’t take a position; rather, you convene all of the stakeholders – and it does have to include all of them. You need to have a real interest in bringing them to the table, in a neutral setting, engaging them, trying to set goals, and then working towards those goals. We’re seeing more and more legislators around the country doing just that. They’re kind of short-circuiting the problems we’re talking about here.

Steve would agree with me. A lot of issues that end up at the Capital shouldn’t be at the Capitol. They could have been resolved locally. And we’re trying to figure out a way to engage legislators to do that, engage that problem, confront the problem, and convene people locally to handle their own

problems. I think it’s a new technique that legislators are starting to use more and more around the country, and I think it makes a lot of sense.

Pearlstein: I always come back to the social matters, getting folks face to face with one another. I’m no fan of the gift ban; I don’t think any legislator is going to be corrupted by a chicken dinner. What do we need to do to get more people face to face, fully recognizing that fewer legislators from Greater Minnesota live in town during session, that there are more women, and so on and so forth? What, practically, can be done?

Moe: The one thing I think we should not have eliminated is when organizations like chambers of commerce, bankers, the Farmers Union and any number of other organizations used to have a legislative day and then a dinner at night and we were all invited. I thought those were great. You’d end up sitting not only with some of your own constituents, but you’d sit with some other group of constituents and listen to them and their issues. You’d also get to listen and talk to their local legislator. I always thought that was one of the things we should not have eliminated.

Pearlstein: But isn’t it just too politically dangerous for any member of the Legislature to now stand up and say, “Let’s amend the gift ban law”?

Moe: I don’t think so. I think generally people would understand that.

Pearlstein: Maybe someone should introduce such a bill.

Sviggum: I certainly agree with Roger on that entire aspect of the gift ban. The gift ban was wrong in that regard. I think it’s good to get together and share in a social function when the League of Cities comes down, or when the Farm Bureau comes down, or when an electric cooperative does the same. You all gather and just have some hors d’oeuvres or a quick meal.

Pearlstein: At the end of the session, when things are really pressure-packed, do you wind up saying things that you really regret a couple of minutes, hours, or days later?

Moe: Well, it's intense. There's no question about it. I always viewed it as if I were back in my competitive athletic days, training for the finals. I made sure I was ready. I also generally had an idea of what the end game was. The end game is always very important in this process—to know where you're going to be and how you can manage things at the end. That seemed to work fairly well. What I tried to do was to let the process work until we got down to about a half a dozen things on which the Speaker and I had to go in a room alone and make a decision. To be perfectly honest, what I discovered about the Speaker's role and mine was that people in that process, the 199 others, needed us. You know why? It was because they needed an excuse, and we were the convenient excuse. I can't tell you the number of times when someone said I was the one who stopped a bill from being heard, when I had no authority to do that whatsoever. The rules of the Senate are very consensus driven and committee driven. It's entirely different with the Speaker, who has real sway in that chamber, which is the only way it can be run, by the way. So really, they needed a convenient excuse and more often than not, we were it.

Sviggum: Roger's right. You need a bad guy once in a while, when things don't turn out your way, if you don't get it your way.

Messrs. Sviggum and Moe then took questions from the audience.

Kim Anderson: I'm president of the Faribault Area Chamber of Commerce and I'd like you to speak to the impact of incivility and the fear of personal attack on the caliber of candidates, both at the Legislature and in local offices.

Moe: I think it has had a chilling effect on the number of people who would be very good on city councils or school boards. Both challengers and

incumbents run against the government. That's been going on now for a generation, and none of us should be surprised when the average person thinks their government doesn't work, when, in fact, by all indicators, it's actually pretty good. If the rhetoric is negative, who wants to be involved in that process? I think that's part of it, as well.

Sviggum: I know six people in this room who I recruited to run for office, or begged or coerced or asked to run for office—Kim being one of them. The only way to improve the Legislature is to get better folks to run—people who have balance and who have the best interests of Minnesota at heart. Without that, you're not improving the quality of the body itself, the body elect. Is there hesitancy for people running nowadays that wasn't there 15 or 20 years ago? I think the answer is yes. People question their sanity as to why they would want to be put in a situation where their opponents will go back and find out what they did in college, what's in their court records, how many times they've been picked up for speeding. Certainly, the advent of independent expenditures in campaigns has made it much more difficult, because it's not just candidate-on-candidate, where sometimes you can be very civil. You now have outside groups spending money and doing and saying anything they want. It's a negative to getting good folks to run. I know that to be true.

Don Lee: Our government's size and scope in the last 50 or 100 years, at the state and federal level, has expanded dramatically. How much do you think the uncivility is simply a matter of the stakes being much, much higher?

Sviggum: Well, as government grows, the stakes probably are higher. Yet even though they may be a little greater today as far as taxes and spending go, I think the issues tend to be the same. I'm surprised that we're still talking about the same issues today as when I ran 29 years ago. Some of the issues are exactly the same. We're still talking property tax reform, and I ran on property tax reform 29 years ago.

Pearlstein: What do we need to do to improve things, other than what we have already been talking about? Or again maybe this is not the worst problem in the world.

Sviggum: If you could put it in terms of other states in this country or other countries in this world, Minnesota is very well off. In Texas, half their legislature actually left the state for two years in a row. I think one year they holed up in Oklahoma and the next year it was Arizona. If you go to Pennsylvania and Ohio, you'll see the problems there. My counterpart and Roger's counterpart from Wisconsin in the late '90s are both in jail. We certainly have problems here, but overall Minnesota's government is well run, and run by people who genuinely have the interests of the state at heart. Everyone can complain and criticize Roger and me or others, but if you put it in perspective, we're much better off than other states or even other countries are at this point.

Moe: If you're going to ask me about one frustration, it would be simply this, and I'll tell it in the form of a story that I tell when I work with classes. I'll say, "How many here have ever put together a jigsaw puzzle?" Well, of course, everybody's done that. I'll say, "Okay, what's the first thing you do?" Some will say they take all of the pieces with the straight edges and put them over in this pile. Some will turn them all face-up first. Everybody has their own way. And they get all done and I say, "Okay, you're all wrong." The first thing you do when you put together a jigsaw puzzle is, you take the box top off and you set it in front of you. Why? So you can see the big picture. The problem in today's legislatures, all across the country, is that everyone has a piece of the puzzle, they are holding their piece, but damn few see the big picture. And that's the problem. We somehow have to get legislators today to see the big picture.

Pearlstein: There's a risk in conversations like these, talking about civility and being nice, as they can turn to goo. This conversation has been crisp and provocative and candid, and I very much appreciate it. ■



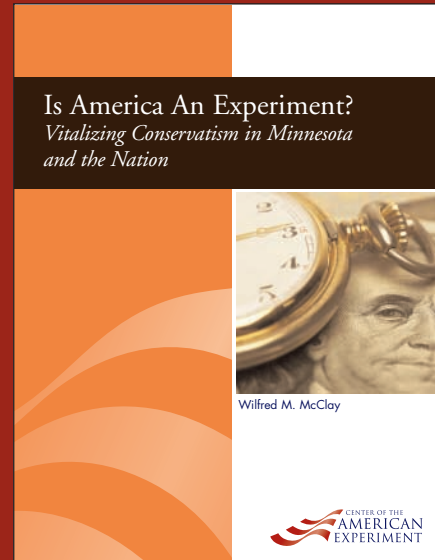
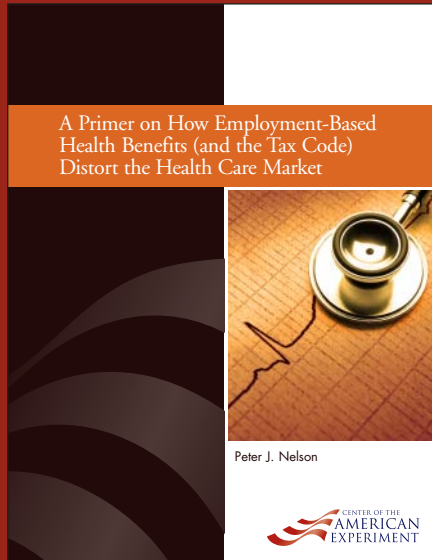
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