



Ted Kolderie of Education|Evolving

Good thinking requires settings that provide time, resources and political freedom

A Civic Caucus *Review of Minnesota's Public Policy Process* Interview
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Present

John Adams, Janis Clay (executive director), Pat Davies, Paul Gilje, Ron Jacobs, Randy Johnson, Ted Kolderie, Dan Loritz, Paul Ostrow (chair), Bill Rudelius, Dana Schroeder (associate director), Clarence Shallbetter. By phone: Lars Esdal.

Summary

According to Ted Kolderie of Education|Evolving, Minnesota's success has come largely from the ability to adapt public systems and create innovative new public institutions. This requires good thinking, good ideas, good analysis and good proposals. He says we are suffering today from a deterioration of this civic process. There is inadequate attention to the question of how to get from problems to goals. Finding the "why" and finding the "how" are very important, Kolderie states. Often the why of the problems and the how of the solutions lie in the structure of the system.

A strong, local civic process will be essential to carry out the thinking needed, he says. Good thinking occurs in "settings," which he defines as an opportunity for organizations and individuals, by themselves or with others, to have the time, the resources and the political freedom to ask unpopular questions, to think about problems and to make unconventional recommendations.

Kolderie cites several examples of successful Minnesota settings, such as the Citizens League and its study committee process, and a national setting, the Carnegie Corporation commissioning Gunnar Myrdal in the 1940s to do a study about race relations in the United States.

Minnesota has had a strong, local civic process in the past and could do this well again in the future, he says.

Biography

Ted Kolderie is co-founder and senior associate at Education|Evolving, a Minnesota-based, nonprofit, nonpartisan policy analysis, design and advocacy organization focused on improving American public education. He has worked on system questions and legislative policy in several areas of public life, including urban and metropolitan affairs and public finance, through the 1960s and 1970s.

He is most recognized nationally for his work on K-12 education policy and innovation, which he has focused on since the early 1980s. Kolderie was instrumental in the design and passage of the nation's first charter school law in Minnesota in 1991, and he has since worked on the design and improvement of charter legislation in more than 17 states.

A graduate of Carleton College and of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public Affairs at Princeton University, Kolderie was previously a reporter and editorial writer for the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, executive director of the Twin Cities Citizens League and a senior fellow at the University of Minnesota's Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs.

Background

Since September 2015, the Civic Caucus has been undertaking a review of the quality of Minnesota's past, present and future public-policy process for anticipating, defining and resolving major community problems. On Nov. 27, 2016, the Caucus issued its report based on that review, [Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: Strengthening Minnesota's Public-Policy Process](#). The Civic Caucus interviewed Ted Kolderie of

Education|Evolving to hear his reactions to the report and to get his perspectives on what constitutes a successful policy process. Kolderie probes these issues in his latest book, *Thinking Out the How*.

Discussion

Minnesota's success--and the Twins Cities success as a city-state--has come largely from the ability to adapt its institutions and to create new institutions that fit changes that are underway. Ted Kolderie said his work reviewing that ability in his new book, *Thinking Out the How*, runs parallel to the work of the Civic Caucus over the past year evaluating the quality of Minnesota's public-policy process for resolving community problems.

The ability to adapt public systems and create innovative new public institutions requires good thinking, good ideas, good analysis and good proposals, he said. "We are today suffering from a deterioration of this civic process. A lot of our policy discussion today consists of deploring problems and reaffirming goals with inadequate attention to the question of how to get from problems to goals. We have a lot of incremental change going on. We have a lot of zombie ideas moving through the discussion."

Kolderie noted that the Minnesota Legislature hasn't made any changes to the district structure of public education since 1991, when it passed the nation's first charter schools law. "That's as good an example of the lag in the attention to the institutional structure as anything," he said.

Finding the "why" and finding the "how" are very important, Kolderie stated. "Often the why of the problems and the how of the solutions lie in the structure of the system. Problems have causes and the causes are not immediately obvious. Understanding them requires good thinking."

The good thinking occurs in "settings." Kolderie defined a setting as "an opportunity for some organizations and individuals, by themselves or together with others, to have the time, the resources and the political freedom to ask unpopular questions, to think about problems and to make recommendations that will often lie outside current conventional notions of what's possible."

In that sense, he said, the Citizens League was a setting. "It thought about the why of problems and came up with a number of solutions that could be enacted," he said. He noted several examples of other successful settings:

- Verne Johnson's work on assisted living when at General Mills. "He thought out the problem and carried it on beyond the stage of analysis into design and prototyping," Kolderie said. Here the setting was a private corporation.
- Orville Peterson's work at the League of Municipalities in the late 1940s. Minneapolis had a population of 520,000 in the 1950 Census. There was no place for young people to live, so expansion into the suburbs was inevitable. But the suburbs needed a competent form of city government. The Optional Forms of City Government Law that the Legislature enacted in 1949 was a brilliant way of going about it, he said. It didn't impose any one form of government on the suburbs. Instead, it created the opportunity for the village council or citizens, by petition, to bring in Plan A or Plan B. Plan B was the city-manager form of government, which is what most suburbs chose.
- The Interim Commission on Municipal Laws that was created in the 1950s that produced the Minnesota Municipal Commission.
- Judge Jack Davies, when a state senator, was a setting by himself in looking at fault-based auto insurance and designing a no-fault system.
- At the national level, Gunnar Myrdal, a Swedish Nobel-laureate economist, was brought in by the Carnegie Corporation to do a study about race relations in the United States. The resulting 1,500-page

report, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, released in 1944, identified the problem as "in the mind and heart of the white American." This interpretation still dominates our discussion about race and politics 70 years later, Kolderie said.

Kolderie said his conclusion about settings is that there is no pattern to them, as in these examples. Recently, there has been some important restructuring within the condominium community here and the redoing of the cooperative statute. "There are multiple possibilities for this to occur," he said, "all the way down to single individuals."

He said there was this freedom when he worked at the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*. There were 16 people working for the editorial pages when he became an editorial writer. "You had the time and the freedom and the opportunity to say unpopular things and tell people what they ought to do without them asking you for the advice," he said.

The financing of "settings." The Citizens League got its financing from a broad base of individuals and business firms. In his time as executive director, Kolderie said, it didn't get any sustaining support from foundations. The League did get some foundation funding for special projects, such as its Public Service Options project. Kolderie said the Citizens League was very independent of its financial base. It didn't get controlled by the donors.

The job of institution building sometimes falls to the people inside the institutions. The League of Municipalities work would fall in this category. "The key thing is to keep this function alive and to keep an awareness of the importance of the continual process of institutional adaptation," Kolderie said.

It's no good rolling out ideas without putting out the ideas for discussion. The willingness of the media to write about ideas was important, Kolderie said. Today, ~~the~~ the media are unable to cover discussion.

Discussion forums are also important. He cited the Itasca Seminar in the fall of 1988, which led to the school chartering idea. The Itasca Seminar took a substantive topic and brought 30 or 40 interested and involved people to a resort in northern Minnesota for a long weekend. "Does that type of thing happen anymore?" he asked.

In his new book, Kolderie said, he does get specific about the problem that needs to be explored and about the solution that needs to be considered.

He made four assertions by way of explanation:

1. The rate of change, even more than the fact of change itself, is the dominant fact of our time. Julius A. Stratton, president of M.I.T. from 1959 to 1966, made that point, Kolderie noted.
2. Affluence is not the normal now. Marc Levinson's 2016 book, *An Extraordinary Time: The End of the Postwar Boom and the Return of the Ordinary Economy*, asserts that the period we're in now won't be like the third or fourth quarter of the 20th century. "It's easy to do a lot of things in a period of growth that are very difficult to do in a period of non-growth or low growth," Kolderie said.
3. Charles Schultze, in his Godkin Lecture series at Harvard in 1976, said (a) the rate of change will create very substantial needs for a large scope of social responsibilities and (b) we can't forever use "command-and-control" methods of governing. It will be better to use incentives. We will need to design the incentives well.
4. Everett Carl Ladd, Jr., then director of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at the University of Connecticut, was warning Republicans in 1980 that the public

is not against the high-service state. It simply wants it to be effectively and economically administered. "How can we design institutions that will meet these two conditions?" Kolderie asked.

Together, these mean we're coming into a period where there's a need for a basic realigning of the underlying ideas about public life. Kolderie discussed the ideas of Eric Goldman, professor of history at Princeton University from 1942 till 1985, about how our basic set of political ideas developed. When America's national government was being set up, the Jeffersonian side of the argument was the small-scale, state solution versus the Hamiltonian argument for a strong national government. The Jeffersonians feared the Hamiltonian approach would lead to the rich and powerful dominating government.

In the late 19th century, Kolderie said, the railroads, trusts and large industrial companies became increasingly national and beyond the reach of the states. In the 1909 book *The Promise of American Life*, author Herbert Croly, founder of *The New Republic*, put forward the idea of using the Hamiltonian state for Jeffersonian ends. He advocated for a Hamiltonian state that is national in scope and powerful enough to take on national problems—a "New Nationalism." But make the Hamiltonian state work democratically, by taking governing away from the rich and powerful. However, early on, Kolderie said, there were concerns that inevitably, the rich and powerful would capture the strong national government.

A strong local civic process will be essential to carry out the thinking needed.

Minnesota has done this well in the past and could do this well again in the future, Kolderie said.

He noted the work of Education|Evolving in thinking through the problems in the education system and proposing changes. It has been possible then for actions taken in Minnesota to be replicated around the country.

Kolderie said former Minneapolis Member of Congress Martin Sabo used to say that it's OK, and possible, to be liberal and a decentralist at the same time. This runs counter to the notion today that everything is national. "Listen to the political discussion," Kolderie said, "and you hear no sense that there is government beyond the Beltway—that we have a federal system."

To have a strong local civic process, Kolderie said, there are these essentials:

1. You need people who are oriented toward systems thinking.
2. They need the time and freedom to think and analyze, which requires financing.
3. They need the freedom to advance ideas outside the conventional consensus.

It really is important today to restore this capacity to adapt, Kolderie said. The communities, cities and states that can adapt probably will be the most successful. This is in today's context of the end of affluence and the rapid rate of change.

Asked what has changed that affects the civic process, Kolderie mentioned four factors:

1. The lawyers couldn't participate anymore, given the change in the law business;
2. Corporate public affairs changed, as the scale of the corporate businesses grew and the hometown became less important;
3. The media changed, with a shift in focus starting in the 1970s, when the newspapers realized that what people really wanted to read were advice columns. Before that shift, Kolderie said, the beat reporters told the desk what the news was and wrote largely for the people on their beat.
4. The legislative process changed as the Legislature staffed up and the elected legislators were advised not to think in terms of more than incremental change. Ideologies sharpened partisan roles.

The civic process probably is inherently below the national level. In response to an interviewer's question, Kolderie said, "In Washington, it's all interest-group pressure. If we're going to have this kind of non-interest-group thinking and discussion and debate, it probably will need to go on in the states and in the "city-states," at the metropolitan level."

A number of organizations that used to contribute to the civic process have disappeared. Kolderie noted that organizations that used to provide an opportunity for the thinking and the discussion, such as the breakfast, lunch and dinner clubs, have largely disappeared. "What the Civic Caucus does is one of the surviving elements of this part of the civic process," he said.

John Cowles, Sr., former publisher of the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, believed the newspaper should be an educational institution. "The newspapers have no charge to play a civic role; they do not have a utility franchise," Kolderie said. "It is a competitive business and with the changes in information technology, this civic role is almost impossible financially. Something new will have to be developed."

One effect, Kolderie said, is that the media now tend to cover not the *issues* (substantively) but mainly *the politics* the issues. "In the past, reporters learned the beat from covering the people on their beat. When the papers couldn't afford to have reporters living on the beat, that educational process disappeared. They have no time to learn anymore."

How do we judge if something good is happening as a result of [the recent Civic Caucus report on the public-policy process in Minnesota](#)? An interviewer asked Kolderie three questions: (1) Planning: Who is the audience for the Civic Caucus report that will make something happen? (2) Implementation: What is our measure of success to know that something good is happening? (3) Evaluation: How do we get a continuing public report card so the public sees the measure of success is being achieved?

Kolderie said there shouldn't be a lot of trouble in knowing the success of the report, because most of the organizational changes should be quite visible.

As to the implementation process, he said, "I've never found it very possible to lay out a process at the beginning that runs out all the way to the end." He said it's a process like climbing a mountain. "You can't see how to get there when you're approaching the mountain, but you have to start. As you climb, you see a little more and you really figure it out as you go along. It's that kind of process."

Kolderie said the planning stage is important. "It's the thinking about the why and the how," he said, "and how to adjust the systems to get things working."

The audience initially should be those that will, or should, carry the responsibility for ensuring the "settings" exist and operate well, Kolderie said. Those are the institutions with a long-term stake in the community. That certainly includes the foundations and philanthropy. Initially, it won't include many in politics. Ideas outside the consensus will be minority ideas and these need time to develop. "Absolutely, it is important to talk to whatever elected officials are willing to think long-term," he said. "We do a lot less of that today."

Kolderie said former State Senator Jack Davies talked about the Legislature being a responsive group that needs proposals brought to it. "It really depends on generating these good ideas," he said.

To lay all the problems we have today on politics isn't right. Kolderie said, "Politics is getting a bad rap. It's always been personal, to some degree petty, pressure-filled, full of economic and special-interest pressures, and partisan. What's changed is that the 'idea' dimension, the clarification of problems and the presentation of new ideas, has weakened. So these other characteristics of politics stand out more clearly."

The concept of investigative reporting is exposing wrongdoing. That's where you get the prizes, the attention and the readership, Kolderie stated. He recently said to Jon McTaggart, CEO of Minnesota Public

Radio and American Public Media, its national programming division, "A lot of public affairs doesn't involve wrongdoing; it's simply disagreement about what we ought to be doing."

The Civic Caucus should include both the thinking part and more consultation with a greater cross-section of the community. Kolderie gave that reply to an interviewer who asked how we should respond to Minnesota's changing demographics, both in race and ethnicity and in aging. For example, Kolderie noted that Citizens League Executive Director Sean Kershaw said at a recent League program that in discussions about education policy, nobody asks the students or listens to them.

Kolderie is concerned that nobody ever talks about young people trapped in the "terrible institution of adolescence. The demographers ought to look at young people when talking about the workforce. By the time they get to their mid-teens, a lot of young people have a lot of capability. Today, young people might be the most discriminated against class of people in our society. Young people are giving us back exactly what we deserve."

There is a lot of confusion about leadership. Kolderie responded that way to a question about the definition of leadership. "People think if you head an organization, you're a leader, but many in those positions are balancers," he said. "There is a function of a leader maintaining the consensus. But before that is the question of the willingness really to take an organization in a different direction."

Civic Caucus: The Power of Ideas? Civic Caucus Chair Paul Ostrow commented that the Civic Caucus has no lobby behind it, no money to distribute, no power in any traditional sense. "What do we have?" he asked. "Ideas." He said perhaps we should consider a new tagline, "Civic Caucus: The Power of Ideas."

A continuing inventory of problems and opportunities in Minnesota would be very helpful. Kolderie said he liked the Civic Caucus recommendation that pushes for someone, perhaps the foundations, to take on that task.

Again: Back to Ladd's concept of the high-service state being well run. Kolderie believes it is a problem that many people strong on social responsibility lack a strong concern about the need for it to be effective and economical. And people who are big on "we're spending too much" are deficient in their notions of social equity. "We need to try to create a new alignment that combines these two outlooks," he said.

The "who" has become much more prominent today. An interviewer commented that Kolderie said years ago that he refuses to impugn the motive when somebody presents an idea. "Look first to the idea, not to who's suggesting it," the interviewer quoted Kolderie. The interviewer then asked if the failure to get to the "how" today is due to failure to get away from the "who."

Kolderie said the "who" probably has become much more prominent today. "There is a sense of good guys and bad guys," he said. "Your job is to get the discussion back to the substantive problems."