

What Happened?

Adam A. Hill / November 7, 2007

This was a disappointing election year. In my school district, Anoka-Hennepin, voters defeated half of our levy referenda and re-elected the inferior school board member Scott Wenzel (despite the fact that challenger Warren Harder was the better candidate and ran a more convincing and engaging campaign).

In the low-glowing light of the 2006 Democratic landslide, and in the shadow of the 35W bridge calamity, I had expected voters to take a look at their voting behavior and start making some tough but smart decisions—beginning with acknowledging that investment in education is one of few public investments that provide direct and observable returns. (In the case of higher education, each tax dollar spent returns seven dollars to the state economy. Imagine the long-term difference that a couple million dollars invested into *primary* schools would make.)

Compared to our traditionally high quality of life, Minnesota is falling rapidly: in terms of health, health *care*, education, economic growth, and many other areas. Unfortunately, we have nobody and nothing to blame except ourselves—and our voters who refuse to confront any tough decision that might cost them a penny or two.

The real problem, though, is not political patterns, signified by voting, but cultural patterns, signified by thought and action. Minnesotans for many years were civic-minded, interested in building a strong and engaging public sphere—not a bureaucracy, but a community. Today, Minnesotans have lost their way, forgotten their cultural heritage, and are starting to worship the loose change in their pockets with an unprecedented defensiveness and shortsightedness.

As Minnesotans—whether we supported the various school referenda or not—we must look around and assess the state of our local civilization, of our public sphere. What are we (both *we* as individuals and *we* as a holistic and unique Minnesotan people) doing to promote the common good in our neighborhoods and in our state? What are we doing to preserve the ideal of the common good that our cultural ancestors, the early immigrants who settled in Minnesota and the several Indian nations who occupied the land even earlier, fostered and worked toward?

Jeannine Ouellette's edifying essay in this month's issue of *The Rake*, an underrated source of high-quality opinion and news in the Twin Cities, is about imagination—"the ability to come up with an idea, and to break that idea down into the steps that will bring it to fruition" (Ouellette:34). Ouellette finds that imagination is disappearing from the psychologically important play in children and, as a result, from our society. She, channeling the poet Dana Gioia, notes that this drop in imagination "'foreshadows an erosion in cultural and civic participation' because [people who possess skills of imagination] volunteer, do charity work, and attend arts and sports events more frequently" (Ouellette:38). Condensed to a single sentence, Ouellette argues (and provides thorough evidence) that an increasing lack of imagination in our society is weakening our capacity to build the world around us in an order that we desire.

The loss of imagination is striking in Minnesota. For generations, Minnesota has been a place where new and progressive ideas took shape and were implemented. We were the first state that held a democratic primary election (in 1900), giving citizens the ability to decide who would appear on their ballots; our caucus system gives the political process a grassroots quality that allows citizens to build their own parties and endorse their own candidates; and, since 1990, we allow residents to contribute up to \$50 a year to political candidates at no cost to the contributor.

The activist Casey Hayden discovered in her experiences working with poor Chicagoans that

People need institutions that belong to them, that they can experiment with and shape. In that process it's possible to develop new forms for activity which can provide new models for how people can work together so participants can [imagine] how society should operate. (Hayden:68)

Unfortunately, the last several years in Minnesota have shown a decline in imagination, in the widespread ideal of the common good; consequently, we have seen a gutting of strong institutions that “belong” to all of us, and that model a new and better way of living. That decline in the culture of the public sphere is really the overlooked story of this election. It is a clear sign that we all need to take a step back to observe our community, and take a step forward in building a world in which we can all live, grow, and learn.

REFERENCES

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