

Interview with James Pehler

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Question: Why particularly did you become a DFLer?

Talks about his father being a Democrat. He got involved because of the Kennedy influence, his main impact. He felt he could get into things quickly and feel he was part of it. The philosophy of this party agreed with him, he felt more comfortable with the same type of individuals and political learnings.

Question: When first getting the legislature, did you have a lot of problems getting into things, getting committee assignments you wanted? Were you treated like a freshman?

Yes. He was very fortunate. He wasn't supposed to have won the election, but he did. This gave him an advantage coming as a freshmen. He got a choice of fairly select committees. He got education and taxes in the House of Representative. This was unheard of. Usually, if you get a Major committee you were considered lucky. Finance was their area. This was an indication by leadership of Marty Sabo who made decisions. He wanted to give him some credibility back in his district to make the next election easier. It worked. He won bigger in the next election. This helped him both in short term politics and taxes is where he stayed the rest of his legislative time. He dropped education. He feels that he was very fortunate and had the advantage in coming in as a freshmen.

Question: Talk about the campaigning a little. What was the most difficult?

Once elected you never stop campaigning. He enjoyed meeting different people, going to meetings, and participating in discussions and debates. He intensely disliked having to go out and raise money. Hated asking people for their support. Unfortunately, that's the reality of what campaigning is about, less of the personal contact from friends and helpers, but more of having to belong to an association to have an impact therefore, if you meet criteria they'll give him money, if not they'll give the money to his opponent who will beat you. Last year there's been a trend of this in our position, we don't want a compromise. He feels this is unfortunate. Part of the reason for not seeking re-election. Getting out and talking to people was great one on one, or groups of 50-100 etc., but as groups got more organized and clustered, couldn't have a good discussion, if something was brought up that some didn't agree on it became an argument rather than a debate. That bothered him so much, the fact that people weren't open to listen. There was a lack of having good open debates on ideas and suggestions and then being able to move from there on how to compromise and work problems out is being lost in American Political System at the state level, local level and the federal law is also having this problem.

Question: Talk about PACs (Political Action Committees) and your relationship with them.

Were most PACs statewide, limited to your district, are there different PACs?

Usually he was tied to some state, got some assignments into the national PACs, but in most cases, teachers for example have PACs. Maybe reviewed, questioned or screened by local individuals, but realistically the state PAC will make the decision as to whether you're going to get money or not. They'll follow or try to follow a recommendation. They'll mostly make decisions themselves. He felt comfortable with the PACs. Lots of people have negative feelings for lobbyists or PACs. He feels this may be unfair. Only frustration he has with them is they want things to go their way 100%. He looked at them as a means of screening and questioning. A

lot of the times if he didn't receive endorsements, it was because he disagreed with their issues on how to go about them.

Questions: Did you have any particular problems with particular PACs consistently?

To a certain extent business communities, chamber of commerce PACs and others like this. Unusually didn't receive endorsements. Did receive endorsements from them at various times. It was mostly because he was Democratic and they basically supported Republicans and he couldn't buy into a lot of their theory, but there were some areas like workers compensation in last 5-6 years that had been an area he's been working on which created some problems for him with Labor PACs because he was 100% for retention of the current system. Businesses were upset because he wouldn't go all the way with them. He was trying to work out something that would preserve what they had as workers compensation system and still get services to people that needed it.

Question: You have any PACs that really went after you?

Oh, yes, in conventions and when he ran in 1986, the last time he ran, the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce pumped in a good \$6,000--\$7,000 in gratuity. They didn't put it directly into his opponents' campaign so she didn't go over the spending limit but they went and bought advertising and ran it on radio against him. That was because he wouldn't go 100% to where they wanted to be on workers compensation. He would look at changes that needed to be done, but that was enough. It was their way or not at all.

Question: What about constituent service, is this something that keeps a legislator pretty busy over the year? Has it kept you busy?

Feels that realistically as a legislator it should occupy at least 60% of your time. He feels if you want to stay in office you should have good constituent service. You should help to clear up and correct as best you can. The problem you run into is you'll try to do whatever you can and you're run into a block and people don't understand that you can't correct it. An example of this is you are down there to make things equal, not necessarily to give favor to one individual or group. He thinks constituent service is still the key and he enjoyed it. It was interesting. A lot of research. Lots of time spent on tracing things down with different commissions or agencies. Sometimes he had to use legislative laws on the books to make changes necessary to make sure people are being treated fairly. Most the time being taking it through bureaucracy (?) and federal government, both state and federal and some national stuff as well.

Question: Do you have as a representative and as a senator did you have a pretty good sense of the basic positions of your constituency?

Yes. Part of the ongoing meetings, although they may represent a group or have influence from a certain group, can give a pretty good indication of what the general feeling is. Just also talking to individuals like in grocery stores, he got a good feeling for a lot of different things. Just chatting with people informally also.

Questions: What degree did you or could you balance off what your own personal convictions are about an issue are versus what you consider to be the desires of your constituents? How do you handle that?

He thinks people feel comfortable with an individual whether they agree with him or her on an issue if that person can lay out, explain, argue or debate or whatever the reason for their action. He has disagreed with his constituents in terms of a variety of issues over the years, some major,

some small. They real “staying power” of an individual is the ability to be able to say to someone, “Look, I disagreed, I voted this way and here are my reasons.” If it’s reasonable and there’s logic behind them 75-80% of the individuals, although they disagree with you, will say okay there was a reason. A politician who doesn’t know why they did it will get into trouble. Somebody told them they should vote that way or they aren’t willing to face their mistake. People accept the fact that you make mistakes. Lots of politicians don’t want to admit they are wrong.

Question: Did you ever vote or take a stand on an issue purely for political reasons that you can remember?

Not purely political. There may have been some where it was toss up one way or the other and his own convictions were such that it was a toss up one way or the other and knowing full well that in his district it would be much better to vote this way not really having impact on his district or not really making a significant difference in terms of government and its operations or health and welfare of constituents.

Question: Were there any issues (going over a period of 18 years) that you didn’t really want to see come up and not deal with as a representative from this area?

He think there are always these issues. Initial seven day waiting period on handguns was tough issue for him. He had problems on how it was going to work. Initially he voted against it when it did pass. He talked chief author in the House who was Tom Berg from the Metropolitan area. He’d support the issue for the metropolitan area but he had a problem with it for his area because he didn’t know how it could be handled or administered. Local sheriffs would be making decisions as to whether to grant licenses or not. He didn’t know what the protection was that

way. (This was in the early to mid-70's). After about 3-4 years the issue came up to repeal it. He voted against repealing it because it had worked better than he thought. He didn't think it had to keep coming up again, but it did.

Question: In the kinds of issues you saw in the 18 years, did you see any changes in what you constituents believed to be important issues, were there consistently important issues or did it change over the years?

Still are same issues that run through. But his constituency changed and will continue to change in this area. He talks about the population transition in St. Cloud. Had a different active group which keeps changing. The active groups had a changing influence on what was important. Education grew more and more on terms of importance. Property taxes and how they were collected and rated was more and more of an issue in St. Cloud. Industry was changing. Went from a lot of small individual owned retail operations to more the chain operations in retail area, but also the manufacturing element of it was growing. There are issues that remain the same and probably will in the next ten years of transition.

Question: As a state legislator, are you often directly lobbied by individuals? Do you spend a lot of your time talking to representatives of certain groups?

Yes, especially if you are chairing a committee because you're approached there and back in home district. When in the legislative process itself, you're not in committee meetings and other things like this, people who are appreciated the most are the ones who can do it in a very short time. He explains how he ended up with four committees at one time. Lot of times he was stopped in the hall by people who wanted to talk to him or they made an appointment to talk. He tried to make himself available, maybe more so then he should've at times. His top priority was

someone from his district who wanted to talk to him. A lot of times people would drop in representing groups. He tried to be accommodating, but he had to leave some time to get the other work done. He would block some time to keep up with the administrative end of running a committee.

Question: Did you have any unpleasant experience with lobbyists?

He's been threatened by some. He shares some of the comments he has received. He's had some legislators give him the wrong information on purpose. He explains how a legislator is looked at for their own character, honesty, and what people have as an impression of you, particularly other legislators. And lobbyists have that same thing from what legislators' perceptions of them is as well as what their fellow lobbyist's perception is. If they aren't honest, you don't even talk to them anymore. He had this happen to a couple of the lobbyists. He used lobbyists for both sides of the issue using their information. He explains if he's carrying the bill, he wants to find out where they are coming from so he knows what he has to get ready for and prepare for and be better prepared as debater and presenter of the bill. He shares the story of one lobbyist who was difficult to work with.

Question: Did any lobbyists try to bribe you in any way?

None tried it. Maybe because of his reputation. He was very blunt about it.

Question: Is there fundamental differences between being in the House or Senate? Is it quite a transition to make?

Yes. When you're in the House you talk about the Senate. When in the Senate you talk about the House. The House he enjoyed simply because it was loser organization. It wasn't quite as rule

restrictive as the Senate might be. He enjoyed the Senate by being a bit more formal, you had a better perception of debate, also a more collegial type attitude. Debate centered more on issues than individuals. There were advantages to both. He liked both. There was more of a problem of making a transition from the Senate to the House.

Question: Why?

He was more accustomed to smoother flowing patterns in the Senate, timing pattern, fewer numbers, you had to cover a broader area. In the House you were just trying to get recognition. You might have two, three, four people trying to get recognition in the same issue or area. In the Senate it was easier because they had all the issues and were looking for people to come in. Story of sharing energy and economic development with Skip Humphrey when he first came into the Senate. The first year in 1980, Skip chaired the committee. He had talked to him both as a House member as well as when he got elected to the Senate about some of his feelings about energy policy in the state and what needed to be done in terms of conservation and some alternatives for recycling and that type of thing for energy and he was like three weeks into the session and Skip came up to him and telling him he should probably be attending the meetings, energy meetings. Skip thought he was a member of the energy committee because he was interested and talked about energy. In the Senate if you expressed some interest outside of an area that you were in, people assumed you were a member of that committee. That's the way; the Senate worked. In the House you had an interest people assumed you were on a committee. There was a difference between House and Senate.

Question: Do you have any reflections on the basic competence of the two bodies from your experience in both bodies?

Yes. In the House by its nature you have to have a more powerful speaker than you would a president or majority leader on the Senate side. Simply because of the numbers. That doesn't tend to remove or limit the number of the people that will be making decisions. Marty Sabo was a very strong speaker, he retained his power not because he was given power as speaker, but because he'd work with individualists and try to meet their needs. By that way he gained their support to retain his position of speaker. He was a master at talking and talking diverse views and points and bringing them together in something that would work and be able to move it through the legal process. The house by nature, needs almost that type of discipline. He's served under other speakers, some not as strong or they tried to be strong but tried to do it by fear rather than cooperation. The one's that worked best knew how to be cooperative but yet firm when they needed to be and take a stand and be able to work things through and pull people in.

Questions: What can a speaker do to coerce? What kinds of weapons do they have?

Speaker points you to the Hall of Committees. He or she appoints all committee chairs. He or she decides if you will serve on commissions and if you do which ones. Speaker will decide staffing patterns. Speaker may decide whether you'll be appointed to be vice-chair of a committee or just be one of the individuals on the committee. Speaker usually doesn't get into all of these things, but these are some of the things he or she may do. He talks about being co-author on quite a few of the bills when they were being drafted. He explains the process and all of the authors of a bill being drafted. The freshman position when drafting a bill was usually reserved for those who they felt were working, cooperative, and had interest in that area or be a benefit to their district.

Questions: Of all kinds of papers and all kinds of things that come up for state legislature, how do you stay on top of it all? Do you have a staff who advise you?

He had a staff which was called majority research staff. It was a pool of individuals who had expertise in three or four areas and he'd rely on them for help. Then he had a Nonpartisan Staff which is the research people who are attached to drafting bills like state economists. Also, he had a House Research Group. He explains that there are issues that are more important than others. A person is always more aware of those. He explains that you look at issues that are being raised that are very technical and amendments that are being proposed that a person thinks they understand, but still not sure what will really happen. A person should key in to other legislators that have knowledge in that area. If you agree with them on an issue, you'll go with them. If not you'll vote the opposite. Eventually, a person knows who has the knowledge in certain areas and you'll go to them. He tells story about an individual who had knowledge in environmental issues. He agreed with him on most topics.

Questions: How can you be interested in so many issues?

He explains that they create an interest themselves. A person has to be a generalist. You have to be broad and willing to look into a lot of areas.

Question: Did you have, when you went into legislature, some political idols that you wanted to pattern your legislature career on?

He did have models that he looked at. One of them was Humphrey. He explains why. The things they do, you kind of pattern yourself after. It's a model that you set your sights on and from there you hopefully develop to be your own individual. The end result is that you're judged by your colleagues as to whether you are perceived as fair, honest straightforward, hard worker, and whether you're a worthy opponent or proponent. Kennedy was another model of his.

Question: Did you have any unforgettable characters? People you will really remember from your political career?

There were some characters who were humorous and witty and there were some that were vicious and mean. Some he wondered why they were even there. But they still did their best and contributed. They may not have understood a lot of things. He explains that some individuals helped this person who didn't understand to pass the piece of legislation to take back to their district and talk about even if they didn't understand what it did.

Question: Do legislators have fun in the process with all of the attacking of each other going on? Do legislators have any fun doing it?

Yes, it sounds like a vicious debate and on the issues, it is. In a majority of times the debate may sound vicious, but it's on the issue not an individual. Particularly in the Senate more than the House, but even in the House the debate is more on the issue than individual. The thing you want to avoid is a personal debate. A person has to have the ability to take an issue, debate it, argue the issue very intensely, argue to win your point, and lose or win you move on to the next item. If you do this over a period of time and you build up a "legislature heat shield" you know the person isn't saying something you should take personally. This is the hardest thing for freshman. He thinks that being in legislation is one of the biggest emotional rollercoasters around. He explains an emotional day he had. Had a lot of highs and lows and it's a very emotional draining process. A person just keeps bouncing from high to low.

Question: What was the most embarrassing thing that happened to you or may be barely escaped embarrassment?

He tells some stories of this. In one story he explained the wrong bill. He explained a complex one and the one he was supposed to explain was simple. He tells more embarrassing stories.

Question: Did you find being in legislature particularly stressful?

Yes. Particularly as you got more and more responsibility and began chairing committees and serving on national committees and things like this. He was expected to be at a lot of places addressing groups plus had to keep contact with his own district and meet with groups of people in his district and have public meetings. One of the reasons he didn't run again was because he felt he was spending more time on the road from St. Cloud to St. Paul than he was spending time in his district. He was usually down in St. Paul even when they weren't in session. Didn't have much time to get back to his regular job at St. Cloud State University. It was down to about 15% of years' time that he'd be back here at St. Cloud State in contract. He'd work in the morning and then drive down to St. Paul for meeting or whatever. Then drive back to work the next morning. He wasn't able to just enjoy things like fishing basketball, golf, walking, etc. He talks about how easy being in legislature can turn into a full time job.

Question: You must have had a lot of support from you family at this Time.

Yes. Not sure how his wife stayed with him! Any of the family vacation time they had was usually coupled with some meeting. He was a member of the National Conference State Legislation. Their family summer vacation was going to wherever this convention for this organization was held. His sons were about two or three years old when he first ran. They just thought everything was normal because they were so young. There were downers, but also had advantages. His sons have been in a lot of places in the U.S. because of this.

Question: Did your family ever take any heat because of your stands in politics?

Sons were hassled at time. Sometimes even by teachers who would raise questions in class which he thought was inappropriate. Most of it was they'd get teased. His sons quickly adapted to an attitude of just saying that's my dad and if your dad or whatever doesn't like it, they can go talk to my dad about it. The sons would get frustrated at times. The oldest son would just simply look at someone and not say anything at all. The younger son would tend to argue at times. Both handled it in their own way. Never really complained about it. The older son didn't like to be pointed out in class by the teacher. Basically, it worked out pretty well.

Question: Talk a little about divisions in the legislature between the metropolitan area and other parts of Minnesota. Is this really a problem?

He didn't know if it was really a problem, but he would say there's more of a division within the legislature than necessarily whether you're a DFL'er or Republican simply because of equal balance. He explains further. Talks about issues that metropolitan area and others parts of Minnesota disagree on. He explains that Minneapolis, St. Paul, Duluth, St. Cloud, Moorhead, and Rochester and probably Mankato become more aligned against suburban area. In education, it broke off on suburbs against urban areas versus transitional areas. Had a variety of factions. It all fluctuated all over. Property taxes would be one example. He talks about how it affected each party.

Question: From an insider's point of view of DFL party, is there a real party leader? Is this a reality on how the parties worked internally?

No. Elected officials in the party have really split apart. He goes back to the problem of people not being able to compromise anymore. This has hurt the party. He explains that his party didn't go to "winner take all." They went to proportional representation within the party. This is fine

and it ensures that there's minority viewpoint that's held and acknowledge. The problem is that when you let go of that minority viewpoint and work for the common good of all the party, there's an unwillingness at times to compromise. He explains further. He feels a process is needed where individuals represent a portion of minority segment of that party or represent two or three parts of that party. He explains further. He talks about that he'd rather see the parties get contributions from the PACs. He doesn't think we're ever going to get rid of PACs, but if money is given by the PAC to the party, it will strengthen the party in a sense that there will be dollars in which they can assist and help the candidates with. This may also help them develop candidates who will have the tendency to be more active in an area and be more involved with the party. The party will then have an interest going because they have some influence and they will have more individuals who want to get into the party to do work and help. He talks about how different this has changed. He still likes the volunteer system. He explains.

Question: What do you consider to be your most important accomplishments? Things you're most proud of?

He's proud that he survived through it all. He came out with the feeling that he did well. Came out with the feeling that he had a lot of friends on all elements. He felt comfortable with himself. He didn't sell himself, didn't do things that he wouldn't want anyone to talk about openly. Just the fact that it was a good experience. He has no regrets. He wouldn't have traded his experience for anything.

Question: Would you do it again?

Now after going through it, no.

Question: Would he do it if he had not gone through it?

Yes. He'd also recommend it to other people. He'd also say don't look at it as a job, more correctly don't look at it as a profession. It's a nice occupation, but is not a profession. Do what you feel is right for as long as you feel you're doing it right and then get out. It takes a lot of courage to walk away because it is very exciting. It plays on your ego, but in reality it's the fact that you have to know when you feel comfortable. He felt he was losing touch back here (SCSU). This was his profession and he enjoyed it and just not having the time of his and his privacy. He feels good about his involvement in education in general. In terms of what happened to the Academic Excellence Foundation which was a specific bill setting up drop out preventions. Just generally the whole process of education and balancing the changes.

Question: What about accomplishments as chair of the Education Committee?

He kept everybody together. He was able to move things through in a nonpartisan way and in fairly smooth order and he feels good about that.

Question: What do you think the major accomplishments were there as far as legislation is concerned?

Went more towards objectives, you can call the outcome based education and can call it a lot of things. He thinks they've done more on curriculum review and development here in Minnesota than a lot of other states have and we've moved towards it. The Legislative Commission on public education took some major steps in that area and he chaired that as part of that responsibility. He thinks they've moved education maybe not as far as some people liked to see, but they moved education more out of a pattern of the 1950s and more into a mode of acceptance or what needs to be done in the year 2020 or 2010. Looking forward instead of resting back to where we were. Doesn't hear specific legislation that he may have carried, is going to be a

pattern that's going to stay there, but he thinks they took the intermediate steps. They keep the framework that was strong. Was added to and expanded out on it. He got the foundation to move on with it. He had taken some major steps on what is happening to our culture in the U.S., but also in Minnesota in terms of it being more of a broad based, multi-cultural, type of education. Started this process, but it has a long ways to go. It started looking more and more of what's achieved in the school, what schools' responsibilities are and the fact that schools just aren't to have someone come in, walk in, and sit in a class and supposedly absorb something for a set number of minutes per day and then move on but its more the whole thing. Schools are becoming more of a responsibility in terms of what's happening in society then what they've been in the past.

Question: Was your legislative committee setting a tone or was it setting concrete recommendations for education?

He thinks it was setting a direction. The tone was established probably in terms of the feedback they were getting from the different teachers, parents, and students. What they did was set some perimeters on directions they were going. Not restrictive, but maybe guiding, change of a pattern or attitude that was generally there. Picked up on some feelings and concerns that were out there in a variety of areas from rural districts as well as the inner city district. Whether we're going to continue in that area with outcome based education, can be something that people might say well we tried that in the 1960s. Could say, well, this is a little different, but you can argue one way or the other, but at least people are talking about it. We're trying to get an idea of how they can do assessments other than standardized tests. Makes it a little harder to grade and makes the teacher work a little harder because then she or he is going to have to look at a multi-dimensional student

whose going to learn certain things in a certain way and in newer ways and patterns on other materials.

Question: What do you think of the criticism that teachers are expected to do too much?

Teachers are expected to carry burden of a lot of things which perhaps should not be their responsibility.

It should be from a standpoint that it is their responsibility and it shouldn't have to be brought back to them to tell them to do. His question is, are we training teachers to be the ones who have all the knowledge and pair it out onto a funnel that goes into somebody's head and then when it gets filled, that person gets stamped and out they go or are the teachers the ones who are supposed to be the ones poking and prodding and letting them trying to find out. He thinks we've got the mentality of the 1950's yet on the terms of what we think our teachers are supposed to be doing as compared to the fact that we have the training out there for providing the prodders and the pointers and maybe what you do is you look at what may have been the Greek Style of education of the early Greeks in terms of the tutoring and mentoring type of process.

Question: It is hard to do that when you have got mass education?

It's hard to do but the other point of that is the fact if we're going to do it and if we really want to be successful and allow equal access there is no other alternative other than to allow that student to feel somewhat of a developmental relationship with someone and the only way you can do that is by placing more individuals, not necessarily just teachers but more individuals into a school. Are we willing to allow someone to become a master teacher who may have 70-80 students but under that master teacher may be two or three levels of adults or/and older students who are participating in various roles of development of that child. Under that master who has 80

there may very well be a child psychologist and social worker who works under that teacher or works with. Talks about SCSU. Views on education.

Question: Worked most on education?

Worked on education most. Also on the environment, but he didn't serve on that committee. He did serve on the legislative commission on solid and hazardous wastes and he thinks they've taken major steps there. Those two major areas. Then some human rights legislation.

Question: Do you have anything that you didn't do that you wanted to do?

Oh yes. Explains. Changes in school, environment. Things he's still working on. Explains.

Overall, he felt 18 years worked out very well. Still receives compliments. He's always asked for advice.

Question: What impact do you think this political experience has had on you as a person? Has it changed you? Brought out certain qualities?

More intolerant in some ways than tolerant. He finds himself more frustrated on people not making decisions when the time has come to make it and that's part of the legislative process.

Loses his patience on that type of thing. His understanding of individuals has been broadened.

Understands diversity. Diversity among reasons of education.

Question: Looking ahead. What do you see of the major problems that this state is gonna have in the next 10 years?

One major problem is that he doesn't think Minnesota is innovative like it used to be. Became less of a unique state. Expect more and more individualized, not working together, etc. Not that we've lost it, just not as much. Could say that about the whole U.S.

Question: What would you say to a young person who'd be interested in going into politics?

Exciting with opportunities, but the hardest job you've ever had. He'd encourage them, not discourage them.