

State Government: Legislators Gather for Nonpartisan Conference

Written by Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31
Wednesday, 14 August 2019 09:34

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State Senator's experience at Summit meeting of legislators from other states and around the world gives opportunity to talk, including on redistricting reform.

EAU CLAIRE, WI - Last week I joined over 7,000 legislators and staff from other states and around the world in Nashville at the National Conference of State Legislatures' (NCSL) annual Legislative Summit. NCSL is a bipartisan organization that has been around 45 years with a mission to advise, train and advocate for state government, regardless of party affiliation.

I went to the conference with no real expectations or hopes. The bipartisan approach seemed so refreshing from the divisive politics we have become accustomed to.

After registering, we all received nametags showing our state and position, but no party affiliation. Though there may have been plenty of caution by some, we were able to strike up real conversations with many of the 7,000 attendees without mentioning our political party.

One morning I sat across from a fellow in the hotel. After chatting for a while, I learned he was from South Africa, and he was the leader of the African National Congress. It was fascinating and impressive that leaders from around the world were there to share and learn.

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Another day I sat down again for breakfast in the hotel, and I met three legislators from Germany. In fact, one mentioned he had relatives in Eau Claire before he even knew I was from there. It truly is a small world.

During the course of the week there were sessions on elections, water, education, transportation, writing legislation, resolving conflict and just about every topic involving government you can think of. Throughout all these sessions we learned from experts and legislators who've been deeply engrossed in the topic at hand while never taking a political stance on the subject. Of course, we all had our own biases, but it was left to each of us to fit the information shared into whatever way we viewed the world or our values.

Early in the conference, I attended a session on school safety. This is particularly timely as we approach a new school year and the concerns over the rise in mass shootings.

The school safety session was well attended. While taking questions, one panelist confessed that he had spent his political career voting against funding for school counselors, free breakfast programs and additional funding for classrooms. He now has such regret that he is using his retirement to volunteer for schools and do whatever he can to raise awareness for the needs of students. That's what a bipartisan conference has the potential to bring out in people. His comments gave me hope that we would hear more open and honest dialogue through the week. And, for the most part, it played out that way.

On the last day I was surprised to find out there were separate Democratic and Republican legislator breakfasts. Not necessarily a terrible idea, I suppose, but it was surprising. The day before we left, there were opposing sessions regarding redistricting. Yes, there was a Republican Legislative Redistricting session and a Democratic Legislative Redistricting session simultaneously. They may as well have called these sessions Gerrymandering 101 for Republicans or Democrats. I did not attend. I can't say for sure what was learned, but it was seriously concerning to me.

On the Republican side, former Governor Scott Walker ran the redistricting session. After overseeing the most extreme partisan gerrymandering of any state in the history of our nation, Scott Walker is now conducting lessons on how to do the same for other states. We should all be alarmed by this effort.

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We can't afford to allow bipartisan conferences to be hijacked by something as vile as extreme partisan gerrymandering. Wisconsin has already lost so much from corrupt redistricting. Let's protect whatever small vestige of cooperation is left and rid our system of all forms of gerrymandering rather than accept it as normal.

We must take the opportunities, like NCSL, for Democrats and Republicans to come together, communicate and learn from each other. This is the only way we can work together and find solutions to the most pressing issues in our state.