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## The Politics of Education in Theseventies

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The article by Flynn (this issue) evoked a response from me for a variety of reasons. What is the direction of politics in education in the immediate future, particularly in North Dakota? Just how involved in "politics" need educators become?

I think Flynn argues forcefully that politics in education are a reality; whether we try to put our heads in the sand or become involved in the various planes of "politics" may determine to a large degree the survival of education at least somewhat free from the vagaries of the traditional political arena. We have survived (for the moment) from the efforts of a Bismarck businessman-politician to seriously strangle all institutions in North Dakota. As a statistician, I am painfully aware of the concept, "How to deceive with statistics." A new problem of deception with statistics, unique to the sixties (but probably getting worse in theseventies) is that in the competition for the attention of the media, even the most burning issue is forgotten by the media (and presumably by the populace) only days after the issue has had its day in the news. This allows those who are less scrupulous with the facts to restore the issue by supplying their own "facts." An example of the latter that could have a serious effect on education in North Dakota was reported on September 19, only 12 days after a referral measure to limit state spending to \$332 million for the ensuing biennium was soundly defeated. A member of the important North Dakota Senate Appropriations Committee was quoted as saying, "It is obvious the Board of Higher Education deliberately postponed revealing their bloated budget before the vote was taken to limit state spending September 7. Had they revealed their request for a 51 percent increase at their August meeting, the 53 percent to 47 percent defeat of the initiated measure could have been reversed." (Grand Forks Herald, September 19, 1976, p. 44)

The preceding quotation contains two serious distortions of facts. In regard to the 51% increase in spending for higher education, a change by the Board of Higher Education in its policy of budget formation caused institutions to report grant money overhead (received from the Federal government) in their budgets for the 1977-79 biennium, whereas this source of money was not included in previous budget statements. Thus, the 51 percent increase is in budget request reported through the Board of Higher Education, not in actual expenditures nor in money that is to be provided by the state legislature. The distortion in relation to the outcome of the election is particularly misleading. Implied is that the outcome of the initiated measure on spending was 53% to 47%. The facts are these: 141,745 North Dakotans voted in the September 7, 1976, primary; of those, 50,917 (35.92%) voted "yes" to limit state spending; 75,790 (53.47%) voted "no" on the initiated measure to limit state spending and 15,036 (10.61%) did not vote on the issue. Apparently, the Senator used the proverb, "If you are not against me, you are with me" to arrive at the 53% - 47% margin. Significantly, state law does not allow for contortions of this sort in deciding the outcomes of elections. For a measure to pass, over 50% of those voting on that issue must approve. Thus, the most accurate report of the outcome of the initiated measure is 75,790 to 50,917, or 59.82% to 40.18%, considerably different from the 53% to 47% margin that was reported.

One probable outcome of holding an election on the initiated measure to limit state spending and the subsequent distortion of the outcome of that election, is to attempt to impress on legislature members the need to "go slow" on state spending. Thus real needs of the state may continue to go unmet in the interest of holding down state spending. Has state spending gone "wild"? Answering this question is obviously value-laden; however, a review of the available facts is useful. For the fiscal year 1974, North Dakota per capita tax collection from state and local sources was \$517 compared to the national average of \$618 (Grand Forks Herald, November 30, 1975, p. 17A). For the same fiscal year, North Dakota had a per capita

income of \$5583 compared to a national average of \$5448. On the one hand one might argue that the local and state tax load is comparatively low when compared to residents of other states. If it is remembered that the state of North Dakota keeps an astonishing amount of cash reserve (presently approaching \$200 million), even that low tax load is not all being spent, but a sizable amount of savings has been accumulated.

Additional facts available from a Carnegie Foundation Report (1972a,b) reveal the neglect of higher education by the State of North Dakota. From 1967-68 to 1973-74, North Dakota's change in percentage points in state expenditures for higher education as a percent of state personal income dropped more than any other state except for South Dakota. The proportion of state funds expended for higher education dropped 9.1% for 1969-70 to 1974-75, the largest drop in the nation (Carnegie Foundation, 1976b). North Dakota leads the nation in fiscal capacity for higher education; here fiscal capacity means higher than average per capita income, a relatively large unutilized tax capacity and low unemployment rate; thus no state is in a better position to sharply increase expenditures for higher education than North Dakota. State expenditures for higher education are .81% of state personal income for 1973-74 compared to the national average of 1.03%. North Dakota's expenditure from state and local sources for full time equivalent students exceeds only Oklahoma among the 50 states (Carnegie Foundation, 1976a). Clearly North Dakotans are not making a strong effort for higher education, a point made earlier by this writer (Williams, 1975).

It would seem that "politics as usual" will not change the dismal state of higher education funding by the State of North Dakota. The "Sweetheart contract" of obedient faculty making requests through the usual channels, which then are taken by college and university officials to the state board, who then take the budgets to the governor, who takes his budget to the legislature, is not working, at least for the faculty at the various institutions. Administrators represent the interests of faculty members about as well as a private corporation's officials represent the

corporation's employees in negotiations; poorly at best. Even the limited resources available to each institution are not distributed on an equitable basis; for a variety of reasons, programs that have had recent surges in student interest do not fare as well as those programs that have the ear of a key administrator. Thus, local campus politics, long practiced by a favored few, can no longer be neglected by faculty or students. Their non-involvement will result in decisions unfavorable to their interests. State politics cannot be ignored any longer; those classical non-political faculty members who teach their classes and conduct some modicum of research but otherwise "keep their noses clean" exist at their own peril. Like it or not, the world has become more and more politicized.

Even teaching classes or conducting research is now viewed in a political perspective. Apparently, some would condemn those who train others how to administer intelligence tests on the grounds that such tests are inherently "unfair" to some group. Without going into a long treatise on the intelligence test issue (but see Williams, 1976) one might argue that the best case against (or for) a given educational area can be made by those who have painstakingly made themselves familiar with the facts and implications of those facts in a dispassionate search for information. This last point might be the bellwether of political involvement by educators; whereas many entered the political arena with a great deal of zeal and/or personal ambition, those who wish to make the greatest lasting contribution to education should enter the political arena only after all available information has been sifted and re-sifted so that those who wish to abuse the facts for their own use can be successfully countered. The political involvement of educators should emanate from their greatest strength; an intimate familiarity with the facts at hand and a fair and impartial treatment of those facts should, in the long run, have reasonable success in the political arena.

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