

SNG-Another Con-Con needed-2-4-19

Another 'Con-Con' might be good but won't happen

By Jim Nowlan

Twenty-nineteen is the golden anniversary of the last Illinois Constitutional Convention, in 1969.

This year also notes the half-century mark in elected office for Illinois House Speaker Mike Madigan, whose served as a delegate to the convention.

I think it may be time for another convention. Thomas Jefferson felt constitutions such as our deified US charter should be reviewed from time to time. Indeed, our state constitution, ratified by the voters in 1970, calls for a vote every 20 years on whether to call a new convention. Voters rejected such a call in 2010, but the present dire state of our state induces me to think it might be high time to revisit our state charter.

The 1970 constitution was considered at the time to be a relatively modern, forward-looking piece of work. For example, municipalities were accorded home-rule authority, the governor was given four veto powers, and the personal property tax was abolished.

The document also empowered the voters to amend the legislative article by initiative and referendum, but the Illinois Supreme Court subsequently interpreted the proviso so narrowly that the power is basically inoperative.

For example, the state high court has rejected the voters' right to consider redistricting reform and term limits, both wildly popular with the voters. I am agnostic on term limits, which concept has pluses and minuses, and much would depend on the length of the terms allowed.

Yet, I do favor the concept of term-limiting lawmakers as legislative leaders. Legislative leaders have statewide influence, yet voters statewide cannot turn a leader like Madigan out from his “rotten borough” (district gerrymandered by him to be safe).

Limiting leadership tenure would not violate the power of local voters to keep their lawmakers in office, if they wish. Limits would, however, limit the capacity of longstanding legislative leaders to aggrandize too much power, as in the case of Speaker Madigan, who has held that post for almost four decades.

Issues such as term limits, an independent redistricting commission, pension reform, a functional legislative initiative and much more could be debated at a constitutional convention.

To look back half a century to the last convention, I called my old friend John Alexander, owner of Books on the Square, delightful stores in Springfield and John’s hometown of Virden, chock full of old American history books. John was vice president of the 1969-70 Constitutional Convention.

“Mike was a quiet back-bencher in 1969,” recalls John, “studious, observant, learning his craft.” After the convention, Mike moved from the Old State Capitol to the present one, with its glorious interior dome, to begin his service in the House.

In not much more than a decade, Mike was Speaker, and he is now the longest-serving speaker in the history of the United States.

Unfortunately, I can only muse here about a new Con-Con—Speaker Madigan would never allow it to be discussed in his chamber, which is prerequisite to getting it on the ballot. Over the decades, Madigan has become obsessed not just with power but with control. And he probably

couldn't control a convention, which would have delegates elected separately from the legislature.

Madigan continues his dictatorial, total control over not only what will be considered in the legislature but even over what can be discussed, through his control of the House Rules Committee.

Madigan cares and feeds his fellow House Democrats well, so they continue willing to support him and join him in blocking ideas he doesn't like, thus forfeiting democracy.

Here is a recent illustration of Madigan's obsession with control. In December, his minions in the 13th Ward on the Southwest Side of Chicago (Madigan's primary fief) tried to muscle off the ballot a college student who had the audacity to propose a challenge to Madigan's own longtime alderman. The minions claimed, incredulously, that 2,000-plus 13th ward residents wanted to recant their signatures on the college kid's petitions.

In embarrassment at this overreach, Madigan's lawyer finally withdrew the speaker's objections to the student's petitions, so as not to have investigators look into how these recantations might have been coerced or fabricated.

Mike Madigan has no other life than politics. He has no hobbies. Politics and control are his passion. He has no idea of a life after politics, so don't expect him to step aside. So long as he is speaker, possibly good ideas like a convention will never be discussed.

Tuck the Con-Con idea in your bonnet. The people will be able to consider it, some day.