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DFL senator urges one-house legislature

It's time Minnesota seriously considered switching to a unicameral (one-house) legislature, says state Sen. John Milton, White Bear Lake DFLer.

Milton, who introduced one of several bills in the 1973 session to set up a unicameral legislature, renewed his proposal yesterday with the release of a study stressing its advantages.

The most compelling reasons for the change, Milton said, are that it would simplify government and improve its accountability.

The average citizen is represented by so many persons that it is difficult for him to comprehend who does what and where to go in time of need, Milton said.

The simplicity of a one-house legislature should make government more accessible to the average citizen, pinpoint responsibility and make legislators more visible, Milton argues.

It also would tend to reduce the game-playing that goes on under the bicameral system, "where the buck never stops but bounces intermittently from body to body," he says.

Pay increases for legislators ought not to be considered until the role, purpose and basic responsibility of legislators is decided, he said.

"That ought to be the last question—not the first. Then you would have a better idea of what kind of salary is adequate to attract the best candidates for the job," he said.

Milton said he would like to have a 100-person unicameral legislature, with each member representing about 40,000 persons. This would mean slightly larger districts than the 134 House members now represent and slightly smaller districts than the 67 senators have.

The change would require a constitutional amendment. It should become effective at the 1982 election, Milton said. The next federal census is in 1980, and the legislature probably will have to be redistricted anyhow, he said.

Legislators would be less afraid of losing their seats if the change is put ahead that far and more willing to put the proposed amendment on the ballot, Milton said.

The study sponsored by Milton was done by intern Linda Thompson, North St. Paul, a Hamline University graduate.

The study disputed a main argument in favor of two houses—that the second house is needed to check bad legislation passed by the first house and that some bills are deliberately treated lightly in one house on the theory they will be studied more thoroughly in the other.

"This is hardly the way to run state government," said

the report. "Wasting time with bad legislation while that time and energy could be used to study other bills more closely is a very inefficient government."

Milton said there still would be checks and balances. The governor would not have to sign "absurd" legislation, and the Supreme Court could throw out unconstitutional legislation, he said. If a committee knows it is the last one to consider a bill before it reaches the floor, "then you would think a little more about it," he said.

The study suggests that eliminating one-half of the legislature would drastically reduce costs. Minnesota's 1973-75 legislative budget is \$23.3 million, nearly double that for 1971-73.

Time wasted on the multitude of bills introduced that "never expect or deserve a hearing" could be reduced under unicameralism, says the study. In Minnesota, 7,323 bills were introduced in the 1973-74 sessions, the report said, and 1,364, or 19 percent, were passed.

Nebraska, which changed to a unicameral Legislature in 1937, cut its costs by half the first session afterward, the report said. It also reduced by 43 percent the number of bills introduced, and the number passed went from 20 percent to 50 percent, the report said.

Legislators tend to consider a unicameral legislature "a joke," Milton said, "but I find talking to people they are very favorable to the idea of a smaller, one-house legislature."



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