Dialogue sets Best Direction for the Future

By: Joel Rogers, Guest Editorial

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However you mark your political calendar -- a month since Tommy left, a century since La Follette arrived, or 618 days till the next gubernatorial election -- this is a special moment in Wisconsin politics.

Thompson's departure neatly punctuates the end of a century that began with the Wisconsin idea -- an experiment in shared prosperity and policy -- and ended with W2, school spending caps and a ballooning prison budget. How we order state priorities at the start of a new century (coincidentally, also a new millennium) is now up for grabs. Wisconsin faces a host of problems -- some resulting from bad choices in the past, some from bad luck and some from a failure to act at all. Together they pose an unprecedented challenge to our distinctive quality of life and our life together as a democratic community. But these problems have solutions, and Thompson's departure has opened up state politics after years of little positive debate. Our future is open. With the 2002 gubernatorial election the next opportunity for a public mandate, now is a good time to foster serious public discussion of what we want that future to be.

This is the reason we at the Center on Wisconsin Strategy have launched the "Sustaining Wisconsin" campaign on state policy choices for the future. A textbook example of the Wisconsin Idea in action, its simple aim is this: to bring to the general public clear and accurate information about the state of the state, and our alternatives for improving it, in advance of the 2002 election.

For those not already familiar with it, COWS is a UW-based research and policy center dedicated to improving living standards in Wisconsin. COWS conducts research and offers policy guidance on a range of issues from wage trends to land use, urban reconstruction to rural economic development, campaign finance to education reform. Its expertise is regularly called on by business, labor and community representatives, and local to national elected officials and policy-makers. In addition to research and policy advice, COWS gets its hands dirty with applied experiments in policy reform around specific social problems. Tommy Thompson, among others, described us as "the Wisconsin Idea in action."

Like COWS itself, Sustaining Wisconsin will be strictly nonpartisan. We're not favoring Democrats over Republicans, or either major party over minor ones. But that's not to say we don't have values. Like most Wisconsinites, we at COWS want good jobs at good wages, safe and healthy communities, good education for our kids and health and retirement security for ourselves, a natural environment that isn't wasted, and a government that's clean and accountable to voters. While these values might not be controversial, they can be more or less achieved or furthered by public policy. The questions we want to explore between now and July 2002, when the governor's race formally kicks off, are "How well are we achieving these values?" and "How might we do better?"

You can think of Sustaining Wisconsin as a public education campaign, or better, as a platform for wider public discussion on public policy. Like La Follette, we believe that "democracy is based upon knowledge. It is of first importance that the people shall know about their government and the work of their public servants." And like La Follette, we think democracy's an ever-unfinished bit of the people's business, an experiment that recognizes that "while much has been accomplished, there is a world of problems to be solved; we have just begun; there is hard fighting, and a chance for the highest patriotism, still ahead of us."

To put it simply, when we look around Wisconsin at the state of our economy, our environment, our neighborhood and communities, our education system and social programs, and our government itself, we think there is much "unfinished" business. Wisconsin wages have stagnated for years, inequality is growing, the environment faces a number of new threats, our educational excellence is challenged, and our government is increasingly awash in the money of special interests. The best guarantee of getting down to the "unfinished business" these problems suggest is an informed public, which is what Sustaining Wisconsin aims to promote.

The Sustaining Wisconsin campaign will use both old and new technologies to achieve this aim -- speeches, community meetings, regional conferences, living room gatherings, fact sheets, briefing papers, slide shows and eventually a video or two. Of special note is the Sustaining Wisconsin Web site, www.sustainingwisconsin.org, which we hope you will visit regularly for news on the campaign, background policy briefing papers of different kinds, and a wealth of basic information on the state and the communities within it. Over time, we hope to use people-to-people events and the Web site to link the citizen supporters of our campaign to each other and to their elected officials and candidates. Our hope is to make the discussion of our future a truly statewide popular discussion, not just an "insider" one among policy wonks or the powers-that-be. And the Web provides an inexpensive way for the voice of the people to emerge.

This column introduces a special collaboration between COWS and The Capital Times to widen word of the campaign and the range of policy problems and solutions we'll be exploring in it. Look for us each week in this space. Whether it's the hard facts on some Wisconsin problems, or some provocative thinking about the range of possible solutions, we think you'll find what we have to say here pretty interesting. Most of all, though, we hope you will find the goal of an informed public a worthy one, and the issues we deal with important enough to want to develop your own views about. Our future depends on it.

Joel Rogers is director of COWS, the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, at the UW-Madison. On Jan. 29, COWS debuted "Sustaining Wisconsin," a statewide dialogue about the future of Wisconsin. The themes expressed in this view of the state of the state will carry through the next 18
months as COWS uses Sustaining Wisconsin to put the Wisconsin Idea into action.

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