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Connally, Texas GOP And '76

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AUSTIN, Tex.—Only seven months after John B. Connally switched from the Democratic to the Republican Party, the Texas GOP celebrated the inauguration of the first Republican governor of the century.

Unfortunately, the festivities last Dec. 1 for State Sen. O. H. "Ike" Harris were just the traditional "Governor for a Day" foolery the state senate stages for its members from time to time.

From the look of things here, it will be a long time before Connally's new allies have a genuine gubernatorial victory—or much of anything else—to celebrate.

Last spring, when the former three-term governor and political strongman took his presidential ambitions into the GOP, Texas Republicans hailed his move as "the most tremendous political breakthrough" possible. They predicted a wave of conversions that would tip the balance of state politics to the GOP.

Connally was quickly followed by a former speaker of the Texas house named Rayford Price. Last month, a state representative from El Paso named Ralph Scoggins became the second Democratic "notable" to announce his conversion. Even by the drought standards to which Texas Republicans are accustomed, that is a long time between small drinks.

The fact of the matter is that as Texas approaches its first election since the Connally switchover, the Democratic establishment which Connally bolted appears more entrenched than ever. And the Republican Party which he joined, far from gaining strength, appears to be struggling to hold its own.

Ex-State Sen. Henry C. (Hank) Grover (R), who came within 100,000 votes of winning the governorship in 1972, and hoped for another chance this year, pulled out of the race last week, with a bitter complaint at the lack of financial support for his campaign.

Nancy Palm, a Grover backer and the chairman of the Harris County (Houston) Republican organization that has been one of the state's most active,

also has quit in frustration.

A little-known Lubbock orthodontist named Jim Granberry is now the likely GOP contender for the first four-year gubernatorial term. At party

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headquarters here, questions about 1974 prospects are turned aside with the statement that Republicans are "building for 1978."

Although they have fielded a full slate of candidates for constitutional offices, the only race that seems to stir genuine GOP enthusiasm is that for the obscure post of state comptroller. The incumbent is retiring and the Republicans have a former Vietnam POW, James N. (Nick) Rowe, as their candidate.

What happened to the anticipated "Connally wave of converts" is a matter of some disagreement. Friends of the former governor say the shift to the GOP he hoped to trigger has been halted by Watergate. "Not even John can overcome that drag," one of them remarked.

Less friendly observers claim Connally has barely tried. Busy on the national GOP speaking circuit as he seeks support for 1976, he has not used his muscle inside Texas politics as he did when he was a Democrat.

Even if he had, it's doubtful how much he could have done. As one Connally intimate remarked, "Many of us would back the governor in anything he wanted to do personally. But that doesn't mean we are his to use on behalf of other Republicans." Even Connally's longtime public relations adviser, George Christian, has chosen to work again this year with Gov. Dolph Briscoe and Sen. Lloyd Bentsen, Jr., inside the Democratic Party.

Brad O'Leary, executive director of the Texas Republican Party, says Connally "has done everything we've asked." And official GOP statistics credit him with being the second biggest money-raiser in the state, trailing only national chairman George Bush.

But O'Leary implies that the Republicans were not ready for Connally. "We're like an old AFL football team, with a lot of promising rookies, that suddenly gets a great veteran quarterback. Connally is a great quarterback, but we still don't have a strong front line."

Whatever the explanation, it appears unlikely that Connally will be able to claim credit this year for helping his adopted party score any significant break throughs in his own state.

And that failure—together with the milk fund testimony and the continuing problems of his patron, President Nixon—may well cloud his chances of heading the Republican ticket in 1976.