

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

9 Oct 3/10/77

John Connally: A Man Without a Party

RALEIGH, N.C.—Moments after former Democrat John B. Connally delivered a brief, inspirational talk to Republicans packed into the governor's mansion here last week, a Republican candidate for office said:

"He's a pro all right, but he hasn't been in the stable long."

Coming almost one year after Connally switched to the Republican Party as the first step toward a probable run for President in 1976, that remark underlines his continuing problems. He is simply not taken all that seriously, even here in a state ideal for Connally-style conservatism, as Republican presidential timber.

The only presidential prospects discussed in high party circles here are Vice President Gerald Ford, far in front, and Gov. Ronald Reagan of California. In fact, apart from his presidential ambitions, Connally's services as a campaigner for Republican candidates this year are considered only marginally useful in North Carolina.

"Connally would help me with money," said one such Republican candidate, "but he'd lose as many votes for me as he'd make." The reason: Connally is a Republican to the Democrats—but he is still a Democrat to Re-

publicans—in short, a man without a party.

Moreover, his politically inept defense of President Nixon may not hurt him in the South, but it is not helping either.

In private, he tells intimates the President was incredibly naive to give his controversial tax returns to the House-Senate Internal Revenue Committee and incredibly stupid to have secretly taped all those Oval Office conversations. But in public he fully defends the President whenever asked, contending Mr. Nixon may be turning the tide with his new defense strategy and exhorting House Judiciary Committee demands for more White House documents.

A longtime political ally protests: "Connally thinks about Nixon and national politics like they think in Dallas, and Dallas just ain't the U.S.A."

Ironically, these Republican criticisms of the ruggedly handsome, 57-year-old Connally persist despite his phenomenally successful tour as a party fundraiser, starting last September and due to end this spring. Connally has now sweetened party and candidate coffers by nearly \$3 million when Watergate and rancid hostility

toward President Nixon have locked many Republican purses.

Indeed, aside from Ford, Connally is the only national Republican kicking in 10 per cent of his gross fundraising take (except for money raised in Texas) to the Republican National Committee. Nor do local party organizations have to finance his expenses, as they do the Vice President's and his vast travelling entourage.

Although some state and local Republican chairmen have complained about Connally's 10 per cent rule, it certainly has not cut the high demand for his services. When his current tour ends, he will have appeared in 38 states and Washington, D.C. His drawing power is all the more remarkable considering that he holds no office.

When he arrived in Raleigh, for example, Republican Gov. James Houshouser gave a reception for which 206 contributors, Republicans and Democrats, paid \$100 a head to shake hands and hear a five-minute talk. At a strictly nonpolitical annual dinner that evening given by the prestigious Citizens' Association, Connally's appearance drew 1,250 guests—300 more than the dinner had ever drawn before. Connally, in short, has star quality.

But the political dividends of his stardom appear to be going to the Republican Party and individual candidates he has agreed to help, not to John Bowden Connally.

The tumultuous excitement that surrounded him last fall, when President Nixon seemed on the verge of naming him to succeed the fallen Spiro T. Agnew, has vanished. Ever since, he has been strictly on his own.

To intimates, Connally now seems less enthusiastic about the presidency than before, not because he doesn't want it but because the only way to get it is full commitment to the primaries, a treacherous path for one so briefly in the Republican Party.

Connally is philosophical about his changed circumstance. Frequently reminding intimates how much he values his privacy, he knows a decision to run in the post-Watergate climate would destroy that privacy, including the privacy of farflung financial dealings which have made him a millionaire.

With no Connally political organization in sight and not the slightest Connally effort to build one, 1976 looks bleak today. And 1976, Connally himself says, would be his last chance.